
A Step into the past

Book 10

Huang Yi

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Chapter 1

Leave No Witnesses Alive

Xiang Shaolong and his men galloped directly towards Han Chuang's residence. Jing Jun had already led his crack troops to surround the residence, sealing off all the small alleys and roads nearby. After they arrived, he had made a secret gesture towards Teng Yi, who then led the tens of remaining soldiers to mount, then directly charge towards Han Chuang's residence.

Han Chuang, trying to catch up from behind, had no idea what was going on. Wasn't this a case of "striking the grass and startling the serpent"? But at this moment, the only thing he cared about was him self. He had no time to worry about anything else, as he whipped his horse onward.

Just as they nearly arrived at the main door of the residence, the residence suddenly was flooded with lantern lights as a large host of Han Chuang's men charged out, putting up a lively display.

Xiang Shaolong glanced backwards, allowing Han Chuang to catch up. In a deep voice, he said, "Marquis, will you cooperate or not?"

At this moment, the flesh on Han Chuang's face was twitching beneath his skin. Violently grinding his teeth, he said, "I will act in accordance with what you say!"

Xiang Shaolong had secretly worried that he wouldn't speak up. Laughing, he said, "I recommend all of your subordinates to come out and wholeheartedly assist us in catching these thieves!"

At this moment, fifty or so horsemen arrived in front of the main gate. Han Chuang shouted to his men, "By my orders, get over here and help the City Guards pursue the thieves!"

His men were flabbergasted, guessing that he must be putting on an act. Assenting aloud in unison, they returned to the manor and called for men to equip their horses.

Xiang Shaolong and his men continued to gallop without pause. After passing a few more streets, he waved towards Han Chuang. "Dismount!"

Before Han Chuang had a clue as to what was going on, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi flew off their still-galloping horses, their movements as graceful as that of a swimming dragon. The soldiers to each side held their horses' reins, and the two horses continued to gallop without stopping. Han Chuang had no choice but to slowly slow his horse down. Only after his horse had slowed down enough was he able to jump down. His horse was led away as well. In his heart, he couldn't help but feel admiration. By acting in such a manner, Xiang Shaolong's brilliance was put on display. If he were Prince Xinling's men, he wouldn't become suspicious either. At the moment, Handan was filled with running soldiers. It'd be strange if his manor was silent.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi darted off to one side. They watched as a group of roughly three hundred horsemen galloped directly towards them. At this

point in time, Han Chuang was walking towards them from a few hundred feet away, at the point where he had dismounted.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Order all of your men to come directly towards us and to obey my men's orders!"

Han Chuang was already riding on the tiger's back and had no way to get off. He gestured to his men, ordering them to continue to advance. He only stopped one person, to whom he said a few words. Only then did the rest of his subordinates, bellies filled with questions, continue forward as directed.

When the sound of hoof steps gradually faded away, Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "Marquis, at this moment, the entire district has been surrounded by my men. Nobody can enter or exit these few streets. So long as you, Marquis, are willing to cooperate with us, I am willing to say that the enemies had buried themselves in Lady Ya's courtyard, and were planning to assassinate her, only for us to have flushed them out, chasing them away towards your manor. Marquis, do you think this plan is workable?"

Han Chuang's face was ashen. After a long time, he gloomily replied, "Is it possible for us to leave no witnesses alive? There's around ten or so slave-girls left inside."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Do those slave-girls know the truth?"

Han Chuang shook his head.

Teng Yi understood Xiang Shaolong's feelings. He said, "We need to act in

accordance with the demands of the situation. If we start killing people at random, that would actually raise people's suspicions."

Han Chuang slowly calmed down. He knew that for Xiang Shaolong to be willing to protect him despite risking execution proved that he really was a true friend. Aside from secretly cursing Prince Xinling's men for having revealed their hiding place and ruined their plans, what else could he do? After sighing, he said, "Let's have you make all the decisions in this matter!"

Right at this moment, Jing Jun appeared suddenly from out of nowhere. He excitedly reported, "Everyone is in place!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a strange sensation. This was like a counter-terrorist operation in the 21st century. These terrorists had occupied a building, and held in their hands a precious manual of weapons diagrams. Their goal was to safely take the manual back home. At this moment, their greatest advantage against these terrorists was that the terrorists had no idea of the danger they were in, and the fact that they had a traitor, Han Chuang, on their side, who intimately knew all of the enemy's details.

Han Chuang asked no further questions. He let out another sigh, then said, "They have thirty five men in total. However, every single one of them is an expert. Their leader is Yue Xing. He is one of Prince Xinling's competent subordinates."

Xiang Shaolong had once shared a seating mat with Yue Xing at a banquet at Daliang, the capital of Wei. He let out a secret sigh as well. After inquiring regarding the enemy's position, he said, "If your men were to enter the

granary they are hiding themselves in, is there some secret password that is needed?"

Han Chuang secretly exclaimed to himself that this man is indeed formidable. Nodding, he said, "The password is, 'Many blessings to Master Lu'. Remember, leave no one alive. I will also need to ask that brother Dong put on a play as well, near Lady Ya's residence."

Wu Guo just happened to arrive by their side with several of his best men. Teng Yi pulled him off to one side and instructed him to order a troop of men one street over to go to Zhao Ya's residence.

Xiang Shaolong clapped his hand on Han Chuang's shoulder. He reassured him, "Marquis, be at ease. I, Dong Kuang, have already decided to act in lockstep with you in this matter. Afterwards, all of the corpses will be spread across the courtyard, the walls, and the streets. In addition, after Xiaocheng gets his secret manual back, he's not going to quibble too much over how I returned it!"

Frowning, Han Chuang said, "The most worrisome problem is that your subordinates might let the secret out."

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder forcefully, before replying in a relaxed way, "The people I have surrounding this place are local Zhao soldiers, but the people who will be accompanying us on this mission are my clansmen. I knew from the start that this had nothing to do with you, Marquis, and I immediately decided to do my best to help you cover this matter up, no matter what."

Han Chuang knew that Xiang Shaolong really should not have acted in such a way. He gratefully said, "Brother Dong, you really are a true friend!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly berating himself for being so soft-hearted, even towards such bad men as Han Chuang. But without Han Chuang's help, it was likely that the only thing they would be able to retrieve would be the ashes of Lu Gong's secret manual. He replied, "Marquis, please go join up again with your servants and wait for news."

After he was done talking, he started to move towards the residence with Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Han Chuang, under the 'protection' of several of Xiang Shaolong's elite troops, was quickly escorted away.

The civilians nearby had been awakened by the hoof steps long ago. All of them were panicked, but nobody dared to stick their heads out to take a look. Instead, they actually shut their doors and windows, afraid that trouble might make its way to them.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the grief and hatred he felt for the deaths of Xiao Zhao and the others, returning to his normal calm and cool-headedness as he began to carry out this counter-terrorist operation.

Borrowing the light of the moon, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, and Jing Jun led around twenty or so crack troopers who were especially talented to flip over the walls with their tools, landing within the wide expanse of the manor's rear garden. They moved as quickly as ghosts, without making any noise.

Everything was quiet, like normal. The only thing which could be heard was

the pre-arranged sounds of horses galloping to and fro, which perfectly concealed and drowned out any sounds which they might have made.

There were three storehouses arranged in a neat row in the garden. The one in the middle was their target, the granary. The group quickly moved towards it, locating all of the doors and windows. They took the best hiding spots they could find. Others climbed on top of the roof, preparing to drop in through the windows.

The granary was totally dark inside. It was totally silent.

Next, around fifty crack troops climbed over the walls as well, hiding themselves within the flowers and other plants in the garden. All of them had loaded crossbows in their hands.

Seeing that all the preparations were in order, Xiang Shaolong motioned towards Teng Yi and walked towards the granary door.

The two pulled out their precious swords, arriving in front of the door.

Knock, knock!

The soul-stirring sound of the door being knocked felt especially grating to the ear.

The granary remained silent.

Teng Yi said in a low voice, "Many blessings to Master Lu!"

A few moments later, a deep voice shouted, "What is it? Why have you come to find us now?"

Teng Yi shouted in reply, "Open the door now! The Marquis ordered us to come here and give you a report."

How could the man know that it was all a trick? With a creaking sound, he opened the thick wooden door by just a crack.

Teng Yi shot out a powerful kick. With a miserable cry, the person who opened the door collapsed inwards along with the door.

The wooden door fell.

It was time to make their move.

The crack troops attacked from the eight windows situated around the granary. First, they threw in around twenty or so wind lanterns which they had just lit. These wind lanterns were marvelously designed. Around the size of a soccer ball, the flame was kept within the center. The lantern cloth were perforated with holes and treated with flame-retardant chemicals. Thus, they would not catch flames. They were one of the secret weapons the crack troops used for night assaults.

The small granary, capable of holding only around ten or so large baskets of grain, was immediately filled with light, revealing the positions of each and every one of the thirty or so men within, be they standing or seated.

At one moment, they were in a world of darkness, where they couldn't even see their own fingers; in the next, they were assaulted by brilliant light. There was no way for their eyes to immediately adjust, rendering them effectively blind. In addition, when hit with such a shocking change, everybody was panicked.

This was precisely one of the best counter-terrorism techniques the 21st century had to offer.

No matter how evil and vile a terrorist might be, in the end, he was still a human. Physiologically, he was no different from any other person.

That was why, out of all the weapons counter-terrorism experts designed to assault the terrorists' senses, Xiang Shaolong was the most proficient and skilled at using cryo beams and nerve grenades.

The former was capable of sending out a beam of cold at a temperature of negative 273 Celsius. At this temperature, absolute zero, all living cells would instantly stop moving. Afterwards, when the enemies were thawed out, they would be totally fine, albeit made prisoners.

Nerve grenades had a very wide radius, and were capable of paralyzing the enemy's nervous system. After the enemy became totally immobile, they were helpless to resist any attacks.

In this age, he obviously did not have access to such awe-inspiring, powerful weapons. But the 'wind lanterns' which Xiang Shaolong came up with, when used in this situation, had much the same effect.

The only difference was in whether or not there would be any left alive.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had mentally prepared themselves long ago. As soon as the wind lanterns were thrown within the room and illuminated their enemy's bodies, the two dropped to the floor and rolled into the room.

At the same moment, Xiang Shaolong threw out a flying dagger, sending it flying into the neck of the door opener, who had been knocked down on the ground as well, blood flowing from a wound in his head.

Within the still-bright room, they saw that the bloodstained murderers were still in full battle gear, and had not yet relaxed. There were two people guarding the door, one of whom Xiang Shaolong faintly recalled as being Yue Xing.

When Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi jumped up, their longswords forcefully rose up from the ground as well, gutting into these two men's bellies.

Just as Xiang and Teng made their sword strikes, the sound of crossbows being fired could be heard, followed by miserable cries.

Before Yue Xing and the other had even had a chance to draw their blades, they felt an unbearable pain. And then, as blood spurted from their bodies, they stumbled backwards.

The remaining men were all struck by cross bolts and staggered around.

Yue Xing and the other man stumbled back ten or so steps before fell down

backwards. Their breathing halted, they died.

Thinking of how Xiao Zhao had been burned to death, how could Xiang Shaolong feel any pity? Charging forwards, he killed two people in a row before realizing that no more enemies remained standing. Jing Jun, who had flipped in through the windows, had killed one more person than he did.

Xiang Shaolong pounced towards Yue Xing's corpse and began to search the body. He found both the original and the copy of Lu Gong's secret manual. A surge of sentiment suddenly swelled within him. If it weren't for these two things, how could Xiao Zhao and the others have lost their lives?

Teng Yi walked towards him. In a low voice, he said, "Are you really going to cover up Han Chuang's role in this?"

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Rising, he said, "Am I too soft-hearted?"

Teng Yi wiped away the fresh blood from his sabre. He dully said, "There's not much time left. Let's hurry up and handle this matter!"

He motioned for the crack troops to move the corpses from inside the courtyard to outside, after finishing off the still-living with a stab, something which Xiang Shaolong himself could not bring himself to do.

King Xiaocheng, seeing Lu Gong's secret manual placed in front of him on the desk, was overjoyed. He didn't really pay too much mind to Xiang Shaolong's description of how he had chased the assassins out of Lady Ya's residence, then surrounded and wiped them out.

Off to one side were Zhao Ya, her beautiful eyes still swollen red, and Empress Jing. Watching, they were both gratified that Xiang Shaolong had become the meritorious hero of the day.

Only Guo Kai's eyes were coldly turning as he said, "How could Comander Dong be so unwise as to not leave a single survivor, who would be able to directly accuse Prince Xinling of his crimes?"

And then he said towards King Xiaocheng, "If we had been able to secure a living witness, we might be able to repair the situation with Wei as well. It looks as though these people also played a role in the attempt to assassinate Lord Longyang."

Hearing his "new husband's" reminder, King Xiaocheng frowned. He said towards Xiang Shaolong, "Chief Advisor Guo's words are logical. What do you have to say for yourself, Commander Dong?"

Xiang Shaolong calmly replied, "Your humble servant had no other choice. I had to kill them as quickly as possible. Otherwise, when the enemies realized that their situation was hopeless, they would move to destroy the manual. Even if they only destroyed part of it, it would still be a great loss for us."

Empress Jing spoke in support, "Lord Longyang had already recognized some of the people involved and verified that the leader of the group was Prince Xinling's servant, Yue Xing. All we have to do is deliver these corpses back to Mr. Wuji, and I expect that he will be very frustrated."

King Xiaocheng was primarily interested only in Lu Gong's secret manual.

When he thought it over, it made sense. Nodding towards Xiang Shaolong, he joyfully said, "Commander Dong, you have accomplished an extraordinary service. Naturally, we will reward you heavily. Hmm..."

Xiang Shaolong knelt down and thanked him. "Majesty, your generosity shames me. No matter what, your humble servant bears responsibility for having allowed this group of bandits to remain undetected in Handan. Majesty, you are already being very benevolent by not pursuing that further. Your humble servant recommends publicly displaying these corpses for three days, sending a public message of reassurance to the people of the city." Seeing how humble he was, King Xiaocheng was all the more delighted with him and nodded repeatedly.

Xiang Shaolong seized the opportunity. "To improve the safety of the city, your servant would like to commandeer some additional men to fortify our defenses. I hope that you will allow it, Majesty."

But on such a matter, King Xiaocheng was not careless at all. He said, "Minister, present your defense plans to us for our perusal. If there are no problems with it, I will immediately approve it." As he spoke, he let out two yawns in succession.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to ask for leave to withdraw.

The day was just beginning to brighten.

Chapter 2

Complicated Situation

Inside the carriage, Zhao Ya curled up inside Xiang Shaolong's embrace, extremely sorrowful over her loss.

Xiang Shaolong rubbed her shoulder and softly whispered, "Keep up your spirit! A dead person can't return back to life. We can only use our grief as strength to embrace all the upcoming dangers."

Zhao Ya twitched, "They all died tragically. We couldn't even recognize their faces. Who would actually dare to collaborate with these murderers? How did they even know the secret path to the palace?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart trembled in fear. If this problem was investigated properly, even Empress Jing would be implicated in it, but if he didn't explain everything to Zhao Ya clearly, with her wisdom, who knows one day she might realize that he had been lying to her all along. So, he explained Han Chuang's role in this incident.

Zhao Ya was filled with hatred, dissatisfied, "How could you let go of Han Chuang?"

Looking at her filled with hatred and fury, Xiang Shaolong started to have a headache, sighed, "I also have no alternative. This incident must surely involve Empress Jing. In our current circumstances, there can only be danger

and no advantage towards Zhao. If the relation between Han and Zhao worsen, it would only provide advantages to Tian Dan and Li Yuan. Ya'er, can you understand my difficulties? Don't forget that I promised you to help your brother to tide over this crisis!"

After this reasoning, it's hard for Zhao Ya to pursue it further, lying back down onto his embrace, she whispered, "Shaolong, I hate my Brother. Besides himself and his personal interest, he doesn't care about anybody else."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed. At the end of it, everyone who becomes the Emperor will become like this.

Absolute power will corrupt anyone.

When he thought about this, he couldn't help but consider Xiao Pan, the future Qin Shi Huang. Just thinking about it brought about intense feeling of dread.

Handan had just passed a quiet but not so quiet morning.

Lord Xinling's underlings had all been executed. Everyone in the city was shaken. This has brought Xiang Shaolong's prestige as the new City Commander to a whole new level of height.

The following few days, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were busy. They have put in place several new preventive measures, but in actual fact, they were secretly preparing a way to capture Zhao Mu back to Xianyang in order to

complete this mission.

With Guo Kai persuasion, Cheng Xu was released and allowed to resume his original post. Both were now even more envious of him. At the same time, they were confused why Zhao Mu hadn't done anything even after knowing of Xiang Shaolong's plot.

Because of Lord Xinling's incident, both Tian Dan and Li Yuan tried to keep a low profile, not allowing anyone to guess what they are doing.

Han Chuang tried even harder to avoid suspicions, rarely went out for anything. Even more, he wouldn't dare to request Shaolong to allow Tian Zhen and Tian Feng to accompany him, relieving Xiang Shaolong of this headache.

Lord Longyang decided to return to Daliang. Xiao Cheng decided on a day inside the palace to organize a banquet in order to send off Lord Longyang.

On the morning of three days before the farewell banquet, Zhao Mu sent someone looking for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong knew what it is all about, left whatever he's doing and went to Marquis resident to see Zhao Mu.

This traitor invited him in to the secret room, excitedly said, "Your idea of loyalty letter is amazing. I can immediately test who is loyal towards me and who is sitting in neutral ground undecided."

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Quickly give me the names of these undecided people so that I may present them to Xiao Cheng to get rid off.”

Zhao Mu pulled out a letter from his chest, spread it out on the table, gleefully smiled, “We both are thinking along the same line. Look! I have prepared it already.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at it closely and only saw more than ten names written on it. Cheng Xu surprisingly was written amongst them. The rest are all prominent ministers and generals inside the city.

Xiang Shaolong was astonished, “Isn’t Cheng Xu Guo Kai’s underling? How could he appear on this list? Could it be...?”

Zhao Mu’s eyes glinted with wildness briefly, “If it wasn’t for me, this ungrateful bastard wouldn’t even have the right to be Palace Commander? You better used this time when Xiao Cheng is unhappy with him to get rid off him.”

With these words, Xiang Shaolong instantly understood that Cheng Xu is definitely not his underling. He only wants to borrow someone else’s hand to kill him so that he can get his underling onto Cheng Xu’s current position.

From this conclusion, who would have the biggest opportunity to be the next Palace Commander would probably be Zhao Mu’s man.

Zhao Mu smiled, “Even if we couldn’t harm him, we have nothing to lose!”

Then he went silent, "Xiao Cheng truly summoned Li Mu to return to the city. The 20,000 thousands elite soldiers under his command are on the way here. They will arrive in Handan in 7 days. Hmph! But his return will only bring about his death because Xiao Cheng doesn't have that many days to live."

Xiang Shaolong secretly rejoiced. He knew that Zhao Mu had decided on a plan to usurp the throne. Pretending to be excited, "I have also prepared everything. Marquis, when have you decided to act?"

Zhao Mu was shivering in excitement. The poisonous snake-like ugly scar on his face and both his eyes were flashing in excitement. He frostily replied, "Three days later during Lord Longyang's farewell banquet. Every ministers and generals will all be inside the palace. That would be the perfect time to act."

This time, even Xiang Shaolong was confused, "But that would be when the security inside the palace would be most tight and the alertness would be most high, where is the opportunity in there?"

Zhao Mu smiled sinisterly, "As long as you can get organise those Generals whom are loyal towards Xiao Cheng to move into the palace and replaced them with our people, then the city will fall under my hands. Under those circumstances, would Handan then be like a meat on top of the anvil allowing me free reign to oppress and exploit."

Xiang Shaolong replied in a heavy voice, "Could Marquis explain it better for me?"

Zhao Mu nodded, "Our helping hand is that thief, Xiang Shaolong. I will

organize someone to leave a mark that he has arrived inside the city. By that time, even if you don't bring it up, the badly frightened Xiao Cheng will force you to track him down. You can use that as an excuse to move about and blockade the palace. On the other side, you can open wide the gate to allow Tian Dan's army to enter the city. By then, who would be afraid of the trivial 10,000 palace guards, even more so when I have my own people inside too?"

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "Isn't this too forceful? It seems like there is slight discrepancy between this and what Marquis had originally planned for?" Continuing in a soft voice, "Can you really trust the Qi?"

Zhao Mu was slightly displeased, "Regarding this, I have my own consideration. As long as you can attain Handan's military power and follow my instructions, three days later would be Xiao Cheng's time to return to heaven. The rest you don't need to worry about. Afterwards, I guarantee that not only you'll become the three army commander in chief, wealth and rank will be yours to enjoy."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the situation won't be as simple as he described but he knew that if he continues to pursue this line of questioning, it will raise his suspicions. After agreeing to his request, he took his leave and immediately headed to request an audience with King Zhao.

Inside the palace, Xiang Shaolong on seeing Xiao Cheng, was afraid that there might be spies amongst the palace guards, sent him an eye signal. Xiao Cheng agreed and led him to walk through the palace garden with the guards guarding from a distance. After listening to Xiang Shaolong's report, he sighed, "Until today, I just realized the loyalty and importance of both Li Mu

and Lian Po towards this Zhao. After eliminating Zhao Mu and his gangs, with Guo Kai and General Dong's help, and also Li Mu and Lian Po, I am confident that we can rebuild our country again. In addition, we also have Lu Gong Secret Manual. Unifying the whole country is just a matter of time. General Dong need to work hard this time. I definitely wouldn't forget your hardwork."

With a person like Xiao Cheng spouting these words is an equivalent of actually confiding in him. If Xiao Cheng can truly be what he promised to do then there is a hope to rebuild the country again. But listening to this heartfelt confession, Xiang Shaolong for whatever reason felt an inauspicious feeling. His heart felt really uncomfortable. Maybe, it's because it doesn't follow Xiao Cheng's normal behavior, that's why it gave him an abrupt feeling.

Looking at Xiao Cheng's pale face, Xiang Shaolong replied in a heavy voice, "If the city's commander post is vacant, who would you choose as a replacement?"

Xiao Cheng couldn't answer right away, frowning, "General Dong, why are you in a rush to know?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "All along, Zhao Mu doesn't fully trust me. He hides many things from me. I saw how confidence he is so he must have someone who is loyal towards him inside the army. If the city commander's position is empty, this Zhao Mu's underling would have a big probability of being chosen for this role."

Xiao Cheng shook his head smiling, “This is only one of Zhao Mu’s wishes. In reality, even I myself am not sure who I would have chosen. There are several candidates, I don’t believe that all of them are on his side.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, “If something suddenly happened to the Commander General, under these circumstances, you must have someone in mind to temporarily lead the guards to avoid any chaos. In your heart, who would be the best candidate?”

Under the Zhao’s Palace Commander, there are 10 Imperial Colonel leading the 10 armies. Each army contains roughly between 1,000-1,500 soldiers. These armies specialize in guarding King Zhao’s safety. All of them have been rigorous training and selection process. They are the elite. Their skills are far above the city guards and the outer city soldiers.

Under normal circumstances, if the Palace Commander could not carry out his duties, one of amongst the 10 Colonel will carry it out instead, selecting the best of them to temporarily take over, mainly because they are familiar the Palace security and activities so as not to cause any problem.

Xiao Cheng deliberated over his choices for a while, sighed, “This problem is hard for me to decide in such a short amount of time.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his indecisive personality and continued to ask, “It seems like if we can’t obtain those Loyalty Letters, then we can’t feel out what Zhao Mu plan is. Let me handle this! Your Majesty, please relax.”

Xiao Cheng fully trusts him, “Tomorrow, I will give you the other half of the

army seal. It will give you the authority to move the armies around.” He paused for awhile then continued, “If Tian Dan also joins in with that traitor that wants to usurp my throne, I want to take advantage of this time to kill him. General Dong, do you have the confidence to do this?”

Xiang Shaolong replied in a heavy tone, “Your Majesty, have you thought of the consequences?”

Xiao Cheng sighed, “I have thought over this issue for several days now. The Qi without Tian Dan would be like a tiger without claws and teeth. The problem is this person is not easy to kill. That’s why I am asking General Dong’s opinion.”

Looking at this worried face, Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, “Leave this to me! Hey! I have a request if Your Majesty would be so kind to grant it.”

Xiao Cheng said, “Please continue, General Dong!”

Xiang Shaolong continued, “Regarding handling Zhao Mu, if Your Majesty could keep this a secret between the two of us and not let anyone else knows, including Minister Guo.”

Xiao Cheng was stunned, displeased, “Does General Dong suspect Minister Guo?”

Xiao Shaolong replied, “As long as we haven’t obtained that Loyalty Letters, I couldn’t be sure who is in that traitor’s pocket. Zhao Mu’s men could even be one of Minister Guo’s underlings. In this important moment, one mistake would cause everything to fall apart. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Xiao Cheng contemplated his words for a while then nodded in agreement. After discussing the details of the operation, Xiang Shaolong left the palace and return to his command center. He sent for Teng Yi and told him of the current situations.

Teng Yi was absorbed momentarily then replied resolutely, “Zhao Mu has started to be more wary of you. Hng! Your performance was just too amazing, especially after snatching back the Lu Gong Secret Manual. If I was Zhao Mu, I would also be a little bit cautious towards you.”

Xiang Shaolong anxiously said, “Not only Zhao Mu became more wary over this, but my biggest problem is that I had serendipitously become the biggest benefactor of Le Cheng’s death. Even more troublesome is that Guo Kai is plotting something in the background. Now I am at a critical time. Truly bad timing!”

Teng Yi blanked, “What do you mean serendipitously?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly while explaining it to him then said, “Now, we have to find a way to grab those Loyalty Letters before we can understand Zhao Mu’s movements. I reckon this sly as fox old thief would want me to get my hand dirty while he just sits by watching. Ai! I’m gonna talk to Tian Dan.”

Teng Yi said, “You better not do that. It seems like Tian Dan is also suspicious of you. If you go, it would be an equivalent of sending yourself to death. You might even accidentally reveal a weak point. If he asked you about the Lu Gong Secret Manual, how will you answer to him? He is not Xiao Cheng. He wouldn’t trust you easily. Furthermore, he must have known the relationship between them and Han Chuang. There’s also Li Yuan. Recently, we might

have overlooked him too.”

Xiang Shaolong was disconcerted upon hearing this. While troubling himself over this, his underling came in to report that Lord Longyang is here to see him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly, “Now, the only one I can trust is this not man and not woman fellow.” After saying this, he went to the main hall to greet Lord Longyang.

After waving away his people, the two of them sits in the corner and starts chatting softly.

Lord Longyang’s spirit had improved a lot, returning almost to his previous condition and gaining back his confidence, watching him closely momentarily, gently said, “This morning, Li Yuan came looking for me. He wants me to join forces with him to force Xiao Cheng to withdraw his troops from the Yan, otherwise Qi and Chu will resort to military forces. Hmph! He is full of himself. After only becoming the country’s uncle for a few days, he felt like he is the representative of Chu’s Xiao Lie.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “If Qi and Chu combined forces to deal with us, would Wei also come out to help?”

Lord Longyang smiled, “Brother Dong, even though your wisdom is as deep as the sea, but your disposition after all is forthright and honest. You wouldn’t understand someone as treacherous as Li Yuan. What he said and what he does is totally different. He only said that to cover up another bigger

treacherous plot. You better warn Xiao Cheng to be more wary of him. Ai! I am really worried about you, Brother Dong!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Why would you say that, My Lord?”

Lord Longyang sighed, “I knew that you attained this City Commander role primarily due to Empress Jing’s backing. After the fire, I want to warn Brother Dong that this woman is very ambitious. Without making any noise, she can play around with people as easily as if they are on the palm of her hand. It wouldn’t even waste a small breath it takes to blow a speck of dust for her to put you beyond redemption. In the past, when Lord Xinling lives away from home in Handan, they were both involved with each other. You are now useful to her, so of course, she would try her best to win you over. Once you have expired your usefulness, let’s see how she will treat you then?”

Xiang Shaolong started to cold sweat, he truly didn’t consider Empress Jing as a threat. Now looking back, she really isn’t that simple. At the present struggle, regardless of which side wins, she will reap benefit regardless.

The problem lies with Li Mu and Lian Po. As long as they’re alive, no one would dare to touch her.

Xiang Shaolong considered himself to be in Empress Jing’s shoes. She wished someone could help her to eliminate her King husband in name only but not in reality so that her son could ascend the throne while she controlled everything behind the scenes. At that time, with Li Mu and Lian Po, these two loyal and famous generals, backing, her standing will be as stable as Mount Taishan.

Suddenly, he understood the significance of his role as the City Commander. Only he could give her power to control Zhao Mu and contend with Qi and Chu, these two foreign forces.

When he thought of this, one soft jade hand covered the back of his hand. Xiang Shaolong was surprised and looked at Lord Longyang. He only saw him tenderly gazing at him, sincerely said, "Please leave Handan! Otherwise you will die without burial ground. It doesn't matter who ascend the Zhao's throne, at the end of it, they both will want to eliminate you."

Xiang Shaolong endured his almost acceptable hand on his hand, resolutely shook his head, "I never cared about life and death before, especially when we are at the juncture of my country's demise, even more, I wouldn't avoid and not care about this, otherwise I will regret it for the rest of my life and I would be ashamed to face my father in the afterlife."

Lord Longyang saw that he is determined, retracted his jade hand, took a long sigh in a depressed state, gently said, "Brother Dong truly is a real hero. I won't force you anymore but if one day Brother Dong can't endure this anymore, please remember that I will be waiting for you in Daliang." Paused for awhile before continuing, "Although Empress Jing and Guo Kai have different opinion on the City Commander post, but both of them, because of gains and losses issues, will collaborate with each other. You have to be careful of them!"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. An idea flashed quickly through his mind. At the same time, he berated himself for his oversight for not realizing earlier Empress Jing's machinations everywhere.

Lord Longyang had nothing left to say and took his leave.

Xiang Shaolong was touched. Full of gratitude, he saw him to the stable outside the command center and sent him off.

He knew in that instant that he needs to start his strategy afresh. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to leave Handan alive. Furthermore, he wouldn't be able to capture Zhao Mu alive.

Chapter 3

Appearing to both Welcome and Spurn

After sending off Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong sent a messenger to secretly summon Pu Bu to inquire regarding Zhao Mu's recent activities.

Pu Bu thought for a while, then responded, "Recently, he spends very little time at his estate. The people accompanying him are all trusted bodyguards who have been with him for over ten years."

Xiang Shaolong said, "How are all of your brothers doing?"

Pu Bu excitedly said, "They are extremely excited. They all say that Master Xiang lives up to his words and has not abandoned them. Your ambush and assassination of Le Cheng was all the more exquisite. However, I still do not dare to inform them that Master Dong is really Xiang Shaolong. It's always best to be a cautious."

Seeing how prudent the man was, Xiang Shaolong felt greatly relieved. "Every time Zhao Mu returns to his estate, is there any room in particular he spends most of his time in?"

Pu Bu was slightly stunned. Nodding, he said, "Now that you mention it, Master Dong, I do seem to recall that the past few times he's returned to the estate, he'll always go to the Jade Peach Garden at the eastern side of the residence. He keeps on walking in circles at the Reclining Traveler's Veranda

there, and also ordered me to send people to guard that place in specific. Five sentry posts were set up. Master Dong, for you to ask such a question, you must know the reason behind his actions."

Xiang Shaolong resolutely said, "Let's see how the situation is tonight!"

Pu Bu let out a sigh. From within his bosom, he withdrew an overhead map of the marquis' estate. "I prepared this map long ago. Every single guard post is marked clearly. This part here is the Jade Peach Garden. The rectangle within the garden is the Reclining Traveler's Veranda. Be sure not to go on the roof; there's a hidden sentry there."

Xiang Shaolong saw how even the hidden sentry was noted down on the map. After analyzing it for a while, he said, "As long as we can breach the outer barrier, we'll have our opportunity. What is this thick line circling around the Reclining Traveler's Veranda?"

Pu Bu said, "That's a man-made creek that also serves as a natural barrier. It definitely isn't easy to get near the Reclining Traveler's Veranda." He explained in detail again.

Xiang Shaolong, fearing that his long absence might raise other's suspicions, quickly urged him to leave.

After sending off Pu Bu, Xiang Shaolong unceasingly analyzed that map, but before he was able to think of any appropriate way by which he could sneak into the estate without attracting any attention at all, he glided in the straight-tempered Ji Yanran.

When this great beauty saw him, she appeared less joyful than she had in the past. She morosely burrowed into his embrace, saying, "I'm very worried! Although you demonstrated your prowess, you've aroused the suspicions of all parties. The strangest thing of all is, why would you have sent people to secretly watch over Zhao Ya's palace, and why is it that when you pursued Prince Xinling's men, you only used your own subordinates?"

Hearing so many flaws exposed at once, Xiang Shaolong was stunned. "Did you come up with this by yourself, or did you hear it from others?"

Snuggling in his arms, Ji Yanran sorrowfully said, "If I can think of these questions, can it be that others will not? Fortunately, no matter what theories they come up with, they still wouldn't be able to imagine that you are Xiang Shaolong. They only suspect that you, Empress Jing, and Han Chuang have some secret plan and are plotting in secret. Everyone knows that without Han Chuang providing information and a hiding spot, there is no way Yue Xing and his men would have been able to sneak into the Zhao palace to commit murder and arson, much less discover the location of Lu Gong's secret manual!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned speechless. Just as he was secretly berating himself for losing sight of the greater picture, this talented woman continued, "For the sake of ruining my opinions of you, Li Yuan unceasingly badmouths you under the pretext of discussing Zhao politics. He claims that you are one of the instigators of the arson, and that you, Empress Jing, and Zhao Ya have formed an alliance, and that you hope to be promoted into the nobility. It's good that he does so. That's why I still go to his place often to hear the news."

Xiang Shaolong unhappily said, "You still meet with him frequently?"

Ji Yanran coquettishly glanced at him. "Oh! How sweet! Shaolong is sipping from a cup of vinegar [getting jealous]. You oversensitive rascal! I'm suffering all this on your behalf. Li Mu has almost returned. When is Zhao Mu planning to make his move?"

Xiang Shaolong explained Zhao Mu's plans to her.

Ji Yanran's face became dignified and imposing. In a solemn voice, she said, "It seems they aren't even willing to let Han Chuang and Lord Longyang off the hook."

Frowning, Xiang Shaolong said, "You think Zhao Mu would be willing to offend both the countries of Han and Wei under these circumstances?"

Ji Yanran said, "Zhao Mu only needs to find an excuse to force the two to remain in Handan. By the time Han and Wei find out what happened, months would have passed. By that time, they would 'hesitate to smash a rat for fear of breaking the dishes nearby'. If within those first few months, Zhao Mu is able to execute or dismiss Li Mu and Lian Po without bloodshed, and also has both Qi and Chu supporting him, it won't be too hard for him to ascend to the throne!"

Xiang Shaolong hesitated for a long time. After first getting a bit frisky with this beautiful woman, causing her entire face to blush red, he said, "Yanran, will you do as I say?"

Ji Yanran was still 30% clearheaded. She sweetly replied, "As long as you don't intend to force me to leave you, anything is negotiable."

Xiang Shaolong said, "How could I bear to? To the contrary, I intend to fall asleep while holding you each night!"

Ji Yanran doubtingly said, "Don't you need to accompany your other wives?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he had just exaggerated too much. He tried to play it all the way through, "Can't we just spread a large blanket to cover everybody?"

Ji Yanran glanced at him tenderly, unable to keep from smiling. "Sleeping together under one big blanket? How could you think of such a thing! I'm not as debauched and depraved as you. Oh! What was it exactly that you wanted me to do?"

Growing serious, Xiang Shaolong said, "How many warriors do you have under you? How good are they?"

Ji Yanran said, "My father and I have, all together, around a hundred family warriors. Roughly twenty of them can be considered high-class fighters. There are no questions at all about their loyalty, especially my own personal men. They are all clansmen who fled to Wei with us to avoid disaster. Each of them have their own unique skills. We even have some expert swordsmiths."

Xiang Shaolong remembered that she was a member of the nobility of the country of Yue, the same as Tian Zhen and Tian Feng. He secretly thought

that the beauties of Yue really were quite extraordinary. His heart suddenly stirred, he began to attack her with both hands and lips, while saying, "Regardless of whether or not we succeed in this venture, we will need to leave Zhao. I want you to come up with an excuse for leaving..."

Ji Yanran's violently trembling face turned white in the blink of an eye. She sat up straight and, ignoring his hands roaming across her breasts, resolutely said, "No! Even if I am to die, I will die with you. I long ago have had my fill of the pain of being parted."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly moved. In a soft voice, he said, "Your departure will only be a ploy. Now that I am the City Commander, I naturally have the capability of stealthily bringing you back so that you might secretly aid me. The reason I want you to leave is so that you can take away both Zou Yan as well as those two twin serving girls of mine to a safe place. That way, I can scheme without fear."

Ji Yanran's pretty face returned to its original color. Letting out a sigh, she said, "As you wish!" Then she mumbled, "The best excuse is to return to Wei for a funeral. By chance, I just received a letter informing me that Empress Wei, who has always treated me like her own daughter, has just passed away due to illness. I will use this as an excuse to immediately head back towards Wei two days from now. When I reach the boundaries of Wei, I will alter my path towards Han. But as far as how to secretly enter Qin and then return to Han, you will have to make the arrangements. Oh! I'm so happy! Not only would I be able to stay with you day and night, I'll be able to stay with you at all times as one of your 'soldiers'."

After an ardent kiss, they discussed various stratagems for leaving Zhao before Xiang Shaolong urged her away.

When Teng Yi saw him, he said, "Han Chuang sent someone here to look for you. He says he has urgent business."

Xiang Shaolong secretly pondered how wonderful it would be if he could create multiple copies of himself like Sun Wukong. His heart suddenly stirred, he pulled Teng Yi off to one side. "Tonight, I am going to burglarize Zhao Mu's mansion. At that time, if you dress up as me, then we can keep everything safe and hidden."

Teng Yi frowned. "The oaths of loyalty?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded.

Teng Yi was silent for some time, then said, "In order to defend against the real Xiang Shaolong, Zhao Mu must have prepared tight, cautious rings of defenses. Must you take this risk?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly. "In order to understand Zhao Mu's plot so as to prevent our boat from sinking in the sewer, there's no better alternatives."

Teng Yi sighed along with him. "No one would be a better fit for disguising themselves as you as Wu Guo. That fellow is especially skilled at playing tricks, and is even more skilled at imitating others' voices and intonations. With me helping to conceal any flaws, I guarantee that no one will be able to tell. Hey! Why don't we have young Jing Jun go with you tonight as well!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "I have received information from Pu Bu which thoroughly details Zhao Mu's defenses. The fewer people who know about this matter, the better. Oh well! I will go visit Han Chuang first. We can discuss things more in depth when I return." When he thought about the placement of guards in the garden, he became all the more cheerless.

Teng Yi, knowing that he had made up his mind, did not speak further.

They arrived at Han Chuang's manor. The marquis' face was somber as he led them into his residence. Only after they arrived at a tightly closed door in an inner room did he speak. "Empress Jing wishes to see you again." Pushing the door open, he walked in.

The only person within the hall was Empress Jing herself. Her back facing towards them, she was staring outside the only window in the room at the garden below.

The rays of light shining past her from the window made this beautiful married woman appear all the more enchanting and graceful. For a moment, Xiang Shaolong found it difficult to link her to all of her stratagems.

The two gingerly walked behind her.

Empress Jing slowly turned around. First, she smiled slightly towards Xiang Shaolong. But when her gaze fell upon Han Chuang, she said with a cold humph, "If the person handling that affair had been anyone but Minister Dong, you would have exhausted me to death, you rash, impetuous man."

Han Chuang was a person of great personal standing. For Empress Jing to openly rebuke him in such a manner in front of Xiang Shaolong made him feel very awkward. His entire face turned red, but he didn't refute her remarks.

Xiang Shaolong soothingly said, "At least the affair is over with now. Empress Jing, please do not blame the Marquis."

Empress Jing's face was as cold as ice. After staring at Han Chuang for a while, she said, "There are still repercussions to come from this matter. I said long ago that considering the current circumstances, it isn't advisable to have any contact with Prince Xinling. And yet, you refused to listen to me and almost imperiled Minister Dong."

Han Chuang sighed, "Elder sister Jing! How else do you want me to pay for my transgressions before your anger will be appeased? I, too, didn't expect Yue Xing and his men to be so aggressive and cause such trouble."

Empress Jing suddenly laughed. Just as the two were feeling confused, the beautiful married woman said, "The only benefit is that King Xiaocheng now trusts Commander Dong even more, and that slut, Zhao Ya, feels extremely grateful to him as well. Fine! I want to speak with Minister Dong in private."

Han Chuang found it appropriate to leave, closing the door as he departed.

Empress Jing approached Xiang Shaolong. At a hand span away, she halted her footsteps. In a soft voice, she said, "Minister Dong, how should I thank you for performing such a meritorious deed?"

Although he knew very well that she was using her beauty to win him over and that her heart was filled with schemes, when he remembered that she held the lofty position of Empress of Zhao and saw how sensual and sexy she was, he couldn't help but feel extremely aroused. With a dry throat, he said, "Empress, you showed me great favor by promoting me. Naturally, I will serve you with all my effort and am willing to do anything."

Empress Jing took another step forward, almost touching Xiang Shaolong's bosom. She lifted her face up, eyes sparkling with light, as she said gently, "The people in this day and age all say one thing and do another. People like Minister Dong, who are willing to risk their own lives to carry out their promises to me, make me feel extremely grateful. I will never forget what you have done for me, Han Jing. I guarantee you riches and honor for every day I am in power."

If this were in the past, Xiang Shaolong's trusting nature would have caused him to feel extremely moved. But after having been warned in advance by Lord Longyang, he was vigilant and only dared to tentatively listen to her words. But he allowed a look of gratitude to appear on his face as he said in a soft voice, "I, Dong Kuang, always pay my debts. And this was just a small matter besides..."

Empress Jing moved forward slightly one more time. Her tall, erect, firm breasts pressed firmly against his chest. Her breathing beginning to grow rapid, she said, "Regardless of whether or not I am the empress, I am a woman. I need a man to look after me. You also know the king's ugly secret. He's also agreed not to interfere with my affairs. His health has grown poorer by the day, especially in the past half year. He's sick and aching all day long.

Hypothetically, if the prince, my son, were to become king, we will need outstanding talents like Minister Dong all the more to assist us. Minister Dong, do you understand the hidden meaning of my words?"

Xiang Shaolong could feel the alluring suppleness of her erect breasts. He secretly thought to himself that only a total idiot would not understand her 'hidden meaning'. He intentionally frowned, "Empress Jing, set your mind to rest. I am totally loyal to you. Ah! Empress Jing, please don't act in such a way! I'm almost unable to control myself any longer."

Empress Jing began to laugh, her face appearing like a blooming flower. She placed a soft kiss on his face before retreating to the windowsill. She smiled enchantingly towards him. "Who is telling you to control yourself? If a person cannot act as he desires, what joy is there in life? Unfortunately, right now, I don't have the time to test and see if you were being honest or just boasting when you claimed to be able to make women desire to never leave you. If you have the chance to visit the imperial palace, try and take the time to visit me!"

After she finished speaking, she brushed past him, smiling as she left. Xiang Shaolong was left behind grinding his teeth, secretly hating her for arousing his lust and making him feel uncomfortably aroused. The worst thing was, he really did want to take a taste of this Empress.

When he thought of this, he suddenly remembered the aphrodisiac which Han Chuang had given him for the purpose of seducing Ji Yanran. If he were to use a little of it, it wouldn't be too unfair! Perhaps he could even flip the situation around and make the guest into the host, and instead control this

powerful woman. This would save a lot of headaches.

When he thought of this, his heart couldn't help but start beating.

When he returned with Teng Yi to the manor, Wu Guo came and said, "Lady Ya has arrived. She's currently chatting with your two wives."

Xiang Shaolong signalled with his eyes towards Teng Yi. The latter understood and pulled Wu Guo off to the side to speak.

Upon entering the inner hall, he saw the three ladies seated in one corner, whispering quietly to each other. Xiang Shaolong felt very curious. Just as he was pondering why Shan Rou was acting on such good behavior, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, off to one side, chimed in unison, "Master Dong has returned!"

The three women all turned to look towards him as one. Smiles appeared on their faces, like flowers blooming beautifully. When adding in the faces of the Tian sisters, who definitely were not inferior to them in beauty, Xiang Shaolong felt his eyes going dizzy and almost lost track of place and time.

Zhao Ya laughed, "Ya'er brought some ornaments over as gifts for sister Rou, Zhizhi, little Zhuo, and little Feng. They all like it a lot!"

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed to himself, "So that's how it is!" He arrived by their side and sat down.

Tian Zhen came over as well. "Master Dong! Can we begin to eat?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded. "I'm about to die of hunger. Where did little Jun go?"

Zhao Ya said, "He went to the pastures this morning. He still hasn't come back."

Xiang Shaolong rose to his feet. "Ya'er! I have something to discuss with you."

Shan Rou unhappily said, "Are you treating the rest of us as outsiders? What do you have to hide?"

Xiang Shaolong felt unhappy. Just as his eyebrows began to rise, Shan Rou let out a giggling laugh. Pulling Zhao Zhi up by the hand, she said, "Don't be so serious, I was just joking!" After glancing at him sideways, she took her sister off to a corner to pore over the gifts they just received, full of joy.

Xiang Shaolong wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry. Sitting down, he shook his head and forced a smile. "A wild horse will remain a wild horse!"

Zhao Ya said, "I also have something to discuss with you. Just now, my imperial brother summoned me to the palace and asked if he could totally trust you. I replied, 'No matter what, Dong Kuang is at least more trustworthy than Guo Kai!'"

Xiang Shaolong's curiosity was aroused. "And how did he react?"

Zhao Ya said, "At first, he was very unhappy, but I asked him, who was it that risked his life to save Lord Longyang? Who retrieved Lu Gong's secret manual

for him? This rendered him without any other arguments."

Thinking of Empress Jing, Xiang Shaolong offhandedly asked, "Does Guo Kai also have an affair with Empress Jing?"

Zhao Ya felt slightly astounded. "I don't know. I imagine it can't be possible! This woman has always treated the affections of men very lightly. If I recall correctly, she has only ever had sketchy relationships with Prince Xinling and Zhao Mu. Where did you hear this from?"

Instead of answering, Xiang Shaolong asked, "King Xiaocheng really doesn't inquire into her affairs?"

Zhao Ya said, "My imperial brother only wants the Empress to not bother him. As long as she doesn't make her affairs public, my imperial brother is happy to let things be as they are. Oh! He's also a bit afraid of her! You still haven't told me where you got your news from!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Lord Longyang told me. Logically speaking, he wouldn't lie to his savior and benefactor."

Zhao Ya was briefly stunned. Slowly, her face became imposing. "If my guess is correct, Guo Kai must have sought out Lord Longyang to try and discern whether or not, in the event of a rebellion, Wei would support that woman. That must be why Lord Longyang would make such a guess."

Feeling a hint of fear, Xiang Shaolong said, "Does this mean Empress Jing and Guo Kai have their own separate scheme?"

Worried, Zhao Ya replied, "Imperial brother's health has been declining with each passing day. Right now, everyone is scheming to benefit themselves. At times, even I'm not sure who is in league with who, much less you."

Shan Rou's voice drifted over. "Come eat! The rice and dishes are growing cold!"

Zhao Ya stood up. "You need to be cautious of Zhao Mu. That traitor is an expert at using deceit and poison, and his techniques are strange and unfathomable. You'll be in trouble before you even know it."

Xiang Shaolong's tall frame rose as well. With one arm, he pulled her into his embrace. He whispered into her ear, "Ya'er, do you have any way to depart from Zhao's borders before Lord Longyang's farewell dinner? Afterwards, I'll meet up with you. This will make my plan of retreat much simpler."

Zhao Ya's fragrant body trembled. Biting her lip, she lowered her head and quietly said, "Can you give me some time to think?"

Xiang Shaolong couldn't bear to press her. Nodding, he agreed. He pulled her to the dinner table. When Teng Yi entered, he waited until Xiang Shaolong gestured him in before going to the table and seating himself on a sitting mat as well.

Tian Zhen was just about to pour Xiang Shaolong some wine, when he said, "I'm not drinking tonight."

Shan Rou glanced at him, revealing a pondering look in her eyes.

Xiang Shaolong reached out and curled his arm around Tian Zhen's pretty little waist. "Zhen'er, are you familiar with Zhao Mu's Reclining Traveler's Veranda?"

Tian Zhen obediently knelt down as well, nodding.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Is there any place within the veranda where one might be able to hide something around the size of a silk manuscript?"

After deeply pondering for a moment, Tian Zhen replied, "That room is filled with gifts others have given to that traitor. He doesn't put any documents or manuscripts there."

Tian Feng interjected, "That place didn't even have a cupboard. But we have been gone for such a long time that I don't know if it's still the same."

Zhao Ya worriedly said, "Do you want to go there to secretly read those oaths of loyalty? Right now, Zhao Mu's nerves are as tight as a bird startled by the twang of a bow. At night, he has vicious dogs patrolling. Please don't go, alright?"

Teng Yi said, "There must be a series of tunnels installed in his manor. Do any of you know about such a thing?"

Zhao Ya and the others all shook their head unknowingly.

Tian Zhen suddenly let out a tender cry. "I remember! Beneath the main building, there's a cellar which is used to store weapons. But I don't know if

the Reclining Traveler's Veranda also has such a cellar."

Upon hearing her words have no bearing on any tunnels, everyone's excitement, which had just been lit, was doused promptly.

Shan Rou sneered, "Even if you knew where the exit to the tunnel is, if I were Zhao Mu, I would have people guarding them, as well as have installed copper tubes to listen to any noise. I would know if so much as a fly entered the tunnels."

Zhao Zhi laughed, "Shaolong, ask sister Rou and see what ideas she can come up with for entering the manor!"

Everyone was stunned. They suddenly remembered that Shan Rou had once attempted to assassinate Zhao Mu within his own palace before safely escaping.

Shan Rou pouted her little lips. "He's a peerless hero who travels alone and does as he pleases. How could he use the help of a woman like myself? Moreover, I, Shan Rou, don't have any part in his magnificent undertaking. I might as well save my breath and take a good nap instead."

Zhao Ya was the first to burst out laughing. "Dear sister Rou, how can our Master Dong not have you take good care of him tonight, after seeing how full of resentment you are? Sister Rou, don't think too much on it." Turning, she winked towards Xiang Shaolong. "Isn't that right, Master Dong?"

Xiang Shaolong helplessly forced out a smile. "Of course! I would like to ask

Miss Rou to take this humble little soldier to the marquis' residence for a stroll tonight."

Shan Rou's anger and resentment turned into excitement. Glancing at him, she said, "Oh, so you're begging me now? Don't act as though you've been forced into it. Even though I'm slightly inferior to you in lowly tricks such as stealing hens and dogs, if we are to compare our skills in infiltrating houses and assassinating people, who in the world is a match for me, Shan Rou? Otherwise, why is it that Tian Dan must tread so cautiously and carefully?"

Zhao Zhi's face changed. "Sister Rou! Now is not the time for assassination!"

Shan Rou impatiently said, "That's just a metaphor." Standing up, she said, "I need to go prepare." As she walked away, she saw that Xiang Shaolong was still staring stupidly at her. She loudly shouted, "Why aren't you scrambling? Go and get prepared! I still have to dress you with a special 'water cloth'!"

Not paying any attention to all the people who were staring at her in amazement, she went into her room.

Chapter 4

Exploring the Marquis' Residence at Night

Dusk is approaching.

A carriage headed out of the residence.

Both Wu Guo, who was masquerading as a fake Dong Kuang, and Teng Yi, surrounded with a group of guards and Lady Ya's bodyguards, rode out escorting the carriage.

The real Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou were hiding inside the carriage. Both had changed into their water-resistant deer skin cloth, only revealing an opening in the face, fists and feet, looking slightly like the 21st century's diving suit.

The one that Xiang Shaolong wears was originally made for Zhao Zhi by Shan Rou. Fortunately, Zhao Zhi's built tall and big, and deer skin is also flexible so he could still wear it with a little bit of difficulty.

Beside their climbing tools, weapons and secret weapons, they also each brought a copper pipe, in case they need to breathe under the water.

But until now, Shan Rou was still reluctant to reveal the secret entrance to the resident. This left Xiang Shaolong feeling very vexed.

Zhao Ya was watching Xiang Shaolong's beautifully shaped body wearing the tight deer skin suit. His imposing and invigorate body were shining with charms. Bewitched, she didn't care that there was other people around. She rushed into his embrace, panting with an enchanting expression.

Xiang Shaolong stroked her shoulder with one hand, while opening the other hand wide and said towards Shan Rou, "Sister Rou, why don't you come and join us?"

Shan Rou glared at him then purposely moved away towards the window and gazed outside.

Xiang Shaolong had known from early on that she wouldn't be submit and be obedient to anyone. He leaned towards Zhao Ya's ear, "Have Ya'er thought about it?"

Zhao Ya knew that he was talking about her leaving Zhao first, in a pleading tone requested, "How about this? How about you leave first then after awhile, I will come out and meet you. Ai! If you want me to leave without knowing that you'll be safe, Ya'er will be worried sick of you."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "If your brother suddenly passed away and the power falls onto Empress Jing, would she let go off you? By that time, I've already returned to Xianyang. It'll be beyond the reach of my power to help you."

Zhao Ya disdainfully answered, "Her position won't be stable immediately. She won't have the time to take care of me. Besides she is afterall a Han, if after she just gained her position, she tried to get rid of the royal clan, the

nobility and ministers would put a stop to it. At that time, if I would like to leave, she would be more than happy to let me go! Ai! Shaolong! What I'm afraid of is another thing!" After she had spoken these words, she grew silent.

Shan Rou didn't hear it clearly, annoyed, "Zhao Ya, can you please speak louder?"

Both of them didn't know whether to cry or laugh.

Xiang Shaolong ignored her and turned towards Zhao Ya, "What are you afraid of, Ya'er?"

Zhao Ya hugged him tightly, dejected, "I'm afraid that other people wouldn't be able to forgive me."

Xiang Shaolong had long been worried over this. He tried to console her, "Once we returned to Xianyang, I will help you to speak with Tingfang and Princess Qian. They have a big heart. They wouldn't hold a grudge against you. Don't worry about the others! This is what you call atone for a crime by good deeds!"

At this time, Teng Yi shouted from outside the carriage, "Get ready! We're approaching the Marquis Resident. Oh! What a coincidence! Tian Dan's carriage is moving towards us."

All conversation stopped inside the carriage. Both Xiang and Shan hid in the corner, while Lady Ya lifted up the curtain and looked outside.

As Tian Dan's carriage was slowly approaching, both carriages slowly came to a full stop.

The fake Dong Kuang, Wu Guo, whipped his horse, with Teng Yi approached Tian Dan to greet him.

Tian Dan stood near the open carriage's window, laughed, "General Dong is so hard working. While we are out drinking wine and having fun, you are working non-stop all day all night. But there's a limit to how much you can push your body. General Dong, please make sure that you don't exhaust yourself."

Wu Guo imitated Xiang Shaolong's voice, blandly smiled, "I was born as a hard worker. The busier I am, the more spirited I become. Thank you for your concern, Prime Minister Tian." No matter the voice, tone or attitude, all unbelievably resemble him, which makes other people shake their heads at this.

Under the bickering light from the lantern, even with Tian Dan's sharp eyes, there wasn't any flaw. After nodding and smiling, he turned towards Zhao Ya, "Lady's countenance is glowing and Lady's expression is very spirited these last few days. Can Lady tell me what the secret to this is?"

Everyone was frozen in fear. They all knew there was a hidden meaning behind this question at Zhao Ya.

Zhao Ya, of course, had her own way, grinned, "Zhao Ya won't let off that easily! Prime Minister Tian is just teasing me." After she said, she quickly

closed the curtain.

Tian Dan laughed out loud. After greeting both ‘Dong Kuang’ and Teng Yi, he gave order to move out.

Both carriages crossed each other.

Xiang Shaolong gestured towards Shan Rou.

It’s time to get off the carriage.

Both of them took advantage of the night to sneak into the Marquis resident through the dense forest in the southwest.

Xiang Shaolong didn’t understand what Shan Rou brought inside the gourd up till they’ve arrived on the small river.

Shan Rou pulled him to squat down with her, “Any mansion, that has a pond, will always has an entrance and an exit for the water. This is Shan Rou’s big secret. Last time, this is how I sneaked into the pool inside that traitor’s resident. If we’re lucky, it might even take us straight to Jade Peach Garden.”

After saying this, she looked proudly at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong said, “It’s around 100zhang (333m) from here to Marquis Resident, how do we breathe?”

Shan Rou raised an eyebrow at him, annoyed, “Idiot! I can go in. Naturally,

there's a way to breathe. What do you think the copper tube is for? Unless it is after a heavy rain, otherwise there is always a small gap between the river's water height and the tunnel's height. As long as we breathe from one end of the copper tube and the other reaches out of the water, wouldn't that solve the problem?"

Xiang Shaolong gasped in admiration, his heart was trembling in excitement. Suddenly he reached over and passionately kissed her, the other hand grabbed her waist tightly. Shan Rou was caught unaware allowing him to steal a kiss off her, after struggling in vain briefly, she kissed him back passionately. To show his gratitude, Xiang Shaolong kneaded her breast shortly before releasing her, "This is my award!"

Shan Rou was blushing till her face and ears are red, after all she was still young. She glared at him and then leapt first into the river.

In an instant, both have dived a metre deep and have seen that the tunnel ahead is dark. They persisted and swam deeper into the tunnel slowly.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with strange feeling.

Every time he performed a task at night, he always felt this change from light to dark feelings.

Just like the light and dark world, both existed together. Common people generally only knows about living during daylight, but they have no idea whatsoever towards this demonic darkness world.

This time working at night, he can only rely on his tactile sense. In this quiet and still tunnel, his senses have grown stronger.

This caused people to step with caution, another world filled with danger and excitement. It is truly a luring world.

After a short awhile, they both came out of the exit and arrived at the lotus pond at the center of the garden at the back of the resident under the bridge.

Within this ringed courtyard, the stars could be seen cascading across the night sky. A misty beam of moonlight shone down, as the sound of the pond frogs croaking could be heard. It was truly an entirely different world.

From afar, a pair of sentries strolled towards them. As the two peered towards the sentries, two extremely strange-looking large green spots of light attracted their especial attention.

Alarmed, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly grabbed Shan Rou by the hand and pulled her down into the water.

His heart was thumping wildly.

It seemed as though those two large green spots of light came from lamp light reflected off of the pupils of giant dogs. These enormous dogs normally would only be allowed to roam around freely late at night, but had been released early in order to heighten the security of the area.

After the sentries passed by the bridge and walked far away, the two lifted their heads up from the water. Shan Rou softly said, "Damn! With those beasts patrolling the land, the only option we have is to slowly make our way via the water. If the Reclining Traveler's Veranda is also protected by two giant hounds, we'll have no choice but to go home and go sleep."

Xiang Shaolong also could not help but feel extremely discouraged, but to give up midway through would be even more of a shame. He forcefully roused himself and headed confidently with Shan Rou in the direction of the Jade Peach Garden, as they separately swam through the pool.

Xiang Shaolong had received strict, intensive underwater training, and agilely glided through the water like a fish. Based on the minute eddies and flows of the current, he discovered a place the water flowed out towards. As both he and Shan Rou raised their heads up out of the water, they both exultantly said, "Found it!" But then, both of them silently called out in dismay.

Which of the two flowed to the Jade Peach Garden? Or did both flow somewhere else? Neither of them could be certain. What was even more frustrating was that both of the secret underwater passages were hidden at the bottom of the pond, and neither had any breathing spaces whatsoever. If one was not able to swim all the way through the passage in a single breath, they would suffocate and die. What a rotten, unfair death that would be!

Xiang Shaolong was quick-witted. Nibbling at Shan Rou's ear, he said, "Let's each take a separate passage. As soon as we figure out where it leaves, both of us need to immediately return. No matter what, we can't try to show off."

Agreeing, Shan Rou left.

Letting out a deep sigh, Xiang Shaolong dove deep into the water. Entering the underwater passageway, he advanced ten feet and discovered that the water was winding towards the left. He hurriedly retreated back the way he came, moving backwards. Within the narrow corridor, it was very difficult to actually turn around.

Shan Rou said, "I swam at least twenty feet forward. The path forward seems to be safe, but we are extremely far from the Jade Peach Garden. How can we possibly swim across without taking any breaths?"

Xiang Shaolong was already recalling and meditating on the cloth map which Pu Bu gave him. "There's yet another pond between this place and the Jade Peach Garden. I think the underwater passage would first pass through that pond."

Even as stalwart a person as Shan Rou couldn't help but feel discouraged. "Even if the pond was placed directly in the middle, it has to be at least a hundred or so feet away. We won't be able to make it that far."

Xiang Shaolong had a brilliant idea. "I have a solution. If we plug one end of our copper tubes, and cover the other end with our hands, it should be more than enough to give us two or three extra 'breaths' of air. Wouldn't that allow us to get to the pond?"

A look of astonishment appeared in Shan Rou's eyes. "Looks like you aren't a total idiot after all. But what will we use to plug one end?"

Xiang Shaolong had a wicked idea in mind. "All I'm wearing underneath this skin-suit is a pair of shorts. Are you wearing anything underneath yours?"

Extremely embarrassed, Shan Rou said, "You are such a lecher. Eek!"

Xiang Shaolong pulled Shan Rou to the artificial man-made 'mountain' in the middle of the pond and unbuttoned her swim suit. Only after allowing his hand to explore and roam freely for a while did he tear off a large piece of her underskirt.

Shan Rou was unusually docile, not attacking him with words as usual. Perhaps it was because she knew that this was unavoidable and so she was resigned to it. Or perhaps it was that she was willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of killing Zhao Mu and Tian Dan. And, after all, Xiang Shaolong had already 'taken full advantage' of her long ago!

As she watched Xiang Shaolong tear the silk apart and use it to stuff the tubes, she dubiously said, "Will it leak out air?" She couldn't help but being concerned over her fate.

Filled with confidence, Xiang Shaolong said, "With three layers of cloth wrapped around it, after the cloth becomes wet, it might let out a little bit of air, but by then, we'll have surfaced long ago. Come!"

The two swam to the passageway entrance, took a deep breath, covered one end of the tube with their hands, and moved into the passageway, with Shan Rou leading the way.

The two rapidly moved in deeper.

After taking about thirty or so steps, the two had to take their first 'breath'. By their 'second breath', the two of them had long ago become light-headed and dizzy. They felt as though the air in the tubes had become exhausted. Without caring about anything else, the two advanced as quickly as possible.

The exit appeared up ahead of them, faintly glimmering.

Overjoyed, the two made their way to it. Rising to the surface, the two rested against the shore and gulped in the precious commodity, air, which they normally paid no attention to.

They were surrounded by trees in all directions. Flowers and trees surrounded the pond, and a house jutted up on top of a stone 'mountain'. It was a very small garden, but the decorations were extremely exquisite.

Each time Xiang Shaolong had previously come to the manor, his movements had been restricted to a few main buildings. He had never imagined that it would also have such an exquisite place as this.

The garden was very lonely. No voices could be heard, and only a few lonely lanterns were lit, immersing the pond in pale, yellow moonlight.

Panting, Shan Rou said, "The situation is even worse. We haven't swam more than a hundred or so feet, and this place has to be at least two hundred feet away from the Jade Peach Garden. How will the air in the tubes be enough?"

Xiang Shaolong was just thinking the same thing. As he blankly stared at Shan Rou, he suddenly had a brainstorm. "Give me a kiss, and I'll be able to think of something."

Shan Rou was stunned for quite some time. Lowering her head, she said in a quiet voice, "If you're lying to me, I'll butcher you." Wrapping her hand around the back of his neck, she gave him a scorching, savory kiss."

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps could be heard. The two of them immediately sank down beneath the water, but their tongues continued to intertwine with one another's.

Only after they could no longer hold their breaths did they rise to the surface. The sentries were long gone by now.

The two of them were both filled with an emotion which would be etched into their bones and which they would remember for the rest of their days, especially considering it came about in such a dangerous, crisis-laden situation.

Not able to bear being separated from him, Shan Rou tightly clasped herself to him. Panting, she said, "Tell!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Let's take off our headgear and use it to cover the tubes. Wouldn't that give us a few extra breaths?"

Shan Rou jubilantly placed kisses on both of his cheeks. "You really are worthy of having been my first man! Only, I'll be in charge of the

manufacturing. I don't trust your handiwork."

Xiang Shaolong frowned. "What do you mean, your 'first' man? Miss, are you planning on having a second and a third?"

Shan Rou naturally and easily replied, "If you men can have multiple women, why can't us women have multiple men?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. "Then who would dare marry you?"

Shan Rou wrinkled her nose, making a ghastly face. "Who says I have to marry? The world is such a huge place. If we manage to kill Zhao Mu and Tian Dan, I'll wander around the world. If I get tired, maybe I'll come find you one day! By that time, it'll be your choice whether or not to accept me."

Xiang Shaolong discovered that he really liked this woman. Compared to others, she was much more similar to the staunch, independent ladies of the 21st century.

Shan Rou paid him no more mind. Pulling out a small dagger from her suit, she went to work.

Because of their previous experience, this time, they were much more cautious when it came to taking breaths. They easily passed another two hundred or so feet of underwater passageways before arriving at the man-made creek of the Jade Peach Garden. They stealthily made their way to the Reclining Traveler's Veranda.

The man-made creek was roughly ten feet wide. The water wove around in a stream like a dragonfly, as beautiful houses, trees, and flowers unfolded in their path, one after another.

The security presence became much tighter as well. Lanterns were hung up on every major road passing through the Reclining Traveler's Veranda. Guards were everywhere, and there were people leading giant hounds on leashes as well. If it weren't for this underwater route, even if Xiang Shaolong had access to his 21st century accessories and tools, it would be harder than ascending to heaven for him to have gotten so far without attracting any notice.

The closest the creek came to the Reclining Traveler's Veranda was around ten or so feet. The two observed the situation for quite some time before they located the position of each and every hidden observer. They emerged from the water, underneath a bridge.

After ascertaining that there were no vicious hounds nearby, Xiang Shaolong waved towards Shan Rou as he scurried out from underneath the bridge. Using a row of flowers as cover, he quickly rushed over to stand next to a tightly closed window. Pulling out a steel needle, Xiang Shaolong inserted the needle into an aperture in the window and undid the lock.

The two nimbly flipped inside the veranda, then closed the window and re-bolted it. Both of them felt utterly exhausted and sat down next to a corner of the wall.

Shan Rou lit a match. Xiang Shaolong quickly used his hands to cover it,

preventing the fire light from seeping outwards.

The reflected light from the flame gradually lit up the inside of the veranda.

The inside was decorated elegantly, with twenty or so exquisitely made wooden cabinets held within its spacious bowels, each of which was filled with all sorts of rare treasures.

The center of the veranda was covered with a felt carpet. Surrounding the carpet were four comfortable, spacious sitting-mattresses which were covered with animal-skin.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was secretly praising Zhao Mu for knowing how to enjoy himself, Shan Rou excitedly said, "Look!"

Xiang Shaolong looked towards where she pointed. Resting on top of two of the treasure cabinets lay a large metal chest, roughly five feet tall. It looked totally out of place.

Shan Rou stroked the giant lock on top of the metal chest. Vexed, she said, "This is the first time I've seen a lock like this. How do you open it?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "I'm a grandmaster lock picker. Let me try."

Just as he grasped the lock, and before he had a chance to take a close look at it, voices could suddenly be heard coming from the main door.

Shan Rou swept a glance across the room. In a low voice, she said, "Onto the

roof beams!" She pulled out a grappling hook.

The sound of the door opening could be heard.

Xiang Shaolong extinguished the match she was holding as Shan Rou shot out the grappling hook. She accurately and precisely hooked the crossbeam pillars in the ceiling of the room.

In the darkness, Xiang Shaolong did not dare to rashly shoot out his own hook. Grinding his teeth fiercely, he said, "Hold on to me!" Grabbing the rope tightly, he began to climb up.

Shan Rou knew that the situation was critical. She tightly clasped her arms around his broad waist and put her life in his hands.

The main door opened. Someone shouted out, "Light the lanterns, and open the windows! The Marquis and his guest are about to arrive."

Xiang Shaolong secretly groaned in dismay. Exhausting every bit of strength he had, he clambered up frantically, as Shan Rou quickly pulled the dangling rope up along with them.

A lantern by the door was lit.

Ten or so sentries walked in. If any of them raised their head up at this moment, there would be no place for them to escape to.

Fortunately, at this moment, the only things on the sentries' minds were to

light the lamps and open the windows. For the moment, no one had the leisure to stare at the ceiling for no good reason.

The two were extremely alarmed. As they huddled in the space between the roof beams and the roof, the space below them grew brightened, and fresh air rushed in, taking away the previous, stuffy air.

Shan Rou moved her dainty lips and gave him a kiss, expressing her admiration.

The sound of footsteps could be heard, followed by Zhao Mu's voice. "All of you get out, now."

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou's hearts were both thumping wildly. They knew that Zhao Mu was about to bring Tian Dan and Li Yuan here. Without question, he must be intending to let them take a look at those 'oaths of loyalty' as a demonstration of his power and influence. Maybe they even had important business to discuss. They couldn't help but grow tense.

Chapter 5

A Shocking Revelation

Ka Cha!

The sound of a giant lock opening reverberated in the quiet chamber, sending fear into the hearts.

With their heads side by side, Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou were prone on a ceiling beam. They locked themselves in that position by inserting their daggers into the beam for support. Unless someone climbs up the supporting round pillar for a look, this is the best hiding spot.

The horizontal beam is supported by eight vertical pillars which formed the foundation for the roof and is thirty feet above the ground.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou had a quick glimpse below and saw Tian Dan and Li Yuan seated at two small coffee tables. Zhao Mu is reaching out to a giant metal chest to retrieve an object.

The Liu Brothers are kneeling behind Tian Dan submissively. One of them even scanned the ceiling which caused them to shrink their heads in fear.

Zhao Mu returned to his own desk and placed the whole stack of loyalty letters on it. There were sounds of flipping.

Li Yuan laughed: “Marquis is indeed brilliant to think of such an exciting method to control your spies.”

Tian Dan added in laughter: “Is this your own inspiration or were you enlightened by your subordinates?”

Zhao Mu laughed back: “Who cares!” He took credit for Xiang Shaolong’s creativity without a tinge of guilt.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved that Zhao Mu did not show Tian Dan his own loyalty letter or Tian Dan would start to suspect him.

Zhao Mu is extremely guarded against Li Yuan. If he divulged Dong Kuang’s real identity, it would be as good as letting Li Yuan know about his relationship with Lord Chunshen.

Li Yuan expressed in admiration: “To think that even Zhao Ming Xiong is in your payroll. I have always thought that he is loyal to Li Mu and Lian Po. You are truly a genius!”

Up in the beam, Xiang Shaolong almost fell down in shock. Zhao Ming Xiong is his assistant General. He and Teng Yi have nothing but praise for his work. He cannot imagine him to be a traitor as well.

Zhao Mu proudly state: “He is not only my men but also my relative. When I got him to join Li Mu, it is to plot against him. Unexpectedly, Lian Po made him the assistant General to Le Cheng. I purposely sidelined him and Zhao Ya that foolish Slut even spoke up for him in front of King Xiaocheng. This is

hilarious!”

Xiang Shaolong was bathed in cold sweat. What a close shave! He felt like he is the owner of a pet tiger. If he did not take precautions, he may even die without knowing why. At the same time, he could relate to the power of Zhao Mu’s hidden weapons.

He thought about his morning conversation with King Xiaocheng regarding the issue of the palace guards. If something happens to Cheng Xu, Zhao Mu can promote Zhao Ming Xiong to be head of the palace guards. With this, Zhao Mu will indirectly control both the City guards and the palace guards.

(So sorry everyone, Cheng Dan and Cheng Xu are the same person. My limited vocabulary got his name wrong before. Please make the correction. Thanks.)

As Xiang Shaolong was hoping Li Yuan will continue with the loyalty letter name list, Tian Dan interrupted: “How is Empress Jing’s situation?”

Zhao Mu arrogantly replied: “Who can guess our real relationship? Not to mention Xiaocheng, even Guo Kai and Zhao Ya have been deceived by us. Han Jing (Empress Jing is Han royalty) acts cold but she is full of passion inside. When she falls in love, she has no reservations. It is my great fortune that she is devoted to me and kept dissuading King Xiaocheng from recalling Li Mu or Lian Po. Otherwise, I would not be able to sit here and talk to both of you.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted and could not believe what he has just

heard.

Are they putting up an act or is it just wishfully thinking on Zhao Mu's part?

Li Yuan implored: "Can Empress Jing really control Dong Kuang?"

On the beam, Xiang Shaolong's heart is thumping wildly and even Shan Rou can sense his palpitation.

Tian Dan concluded: "Dong Kuang appears to be straightforward and uneducated but he is full of strategies and knows how to pander to those in power. He helped Empress Jing settled the plot between Han Chuang and Prince Xinling while keeping Xiaocheng in the dark. He has laid his bets on Empress Jing, hoping that when Xiaocheng is dead, he will be able to spread his wings. This man must not live."

Li Yuan coldly promised: "I must kill him myself."

Zhao Mu plainly said: "This man is of great use now. Luckily, he did not know that Empress Jing is my woman. Humph! This man forgets his principles when he identifies gains. Even if Imperial Uncle does not act, I will not let him go."

Xiang Shaolong finally calmed down and did his analysis. He screwed up on Han Chuang's incident. The most hateful is Empress Jing who had betrayed him to Zhao Mu. They are definitely a pair of scheming adulterers.

Tian Dan suddenly mentioned: "Both gentlemen have neglected an important figure."

Zhao Mu and Li Yuan were taken aback.

Tian Dan explained: “That person is Xiang Shaolong. He is definitely connected to Le Cheng’s death. We are still puzzled about why he chose to kill Le Cheng first.”

He paused and continued: “If Xiaocheng is behind this, there will be some traces of evidence. There will be injuries, deaths, or missing people in his trusted troops. We did not see any of these so he is not involved. This is getting more and more interesting.”

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou were petrified.

Tian Dan revealed: “I did remind Dong Kuang to search Le Cheng’s men for spies. Apparently, he did not investigate or could not find any evidence. We cannot interfere ourselves or we will expose our intentions.”

Li Yuan suggested: “Dong Kuang is the main beneficiary in his death. Could it be done by him?”

Zhao Mu cut in: “He had no idea he can be the City Commander. If not for my instruction to Empress Jing to recommend him to Xiaocheng, he will be dead before it is his turn.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as he finally understood why Empress Jing looked up to him.

Tonight’s extraordinary opportunity to eavesdrop in their meeting is a

godsend. Otherwise he will end up as a muddle-headed ghost.

Tian Dan observed: “Dong Kuang can pretend to be sick but none of his men are injured or dead. He has nothing to do with Le Cheng’s death.”

Zhao Mu sighed: “Le Cheng has numerous enemies. It is hard to judge who the killer is. As long as they leave the city quickly, we cannot determine who they are.”

Tian Dan resolutely swore: “It must be Xiang Shaolong. I know he is here. Otherwise, Zhao Ya will not regain her energetic lifestyle. I met her and Dong Kuang outside the residence. Her carefree and graceful disposition can only come from a woman who has reignited the love of her life.”

Li Yuan joked: “Can she be in love with Dong Kuang?”

Zhao Mu’s countenance changed: “Chancellor Tian is right. Xiang Shaolong must be in town. I am familiar with her behaviour. Dong Kuang is just a playmate. The only man in her heart is Xiang Shaolong. Xiang Shaolong may even be hiding out in her residence.”

Tian Dan emotionally recommended: “This is highly probable. Regardless of whether it is true or not, we can still get Zhao Ya into trouble. Once we find evidence of Xiang Shaolong’s existence, there is no way she can talk herself out of trouble. Now, Guo Kai and Cheng Xu are trying to outperform Dong Kuang and they will leap at this opportunity to prove themselves. Does Marquis understand my meaning?”

Zhao Mu laughed out in admiration: “Chancellor Tian is a master strategist who offers great plans. I have a better suggestion. We get Empress Jing to command Dong Kuang to carry out this matter. By putting some flying needles and bloodied clothes in her personal room, Zhao Ya can never redeem herself; This can also test Dong Kuang’s loyalty to Empress Jing. Hng! I have long wanted to deal with this Slut.”

On the beam, both persons looked at each other and were wet with cold sweat.

The three devils below them are full of evil schemes. Even if they are aware of what is coming, they are unable to counteract them in such a short time.

Tian Dan stood up and commented: “We should not stay for too long or this banquet will arouse suspicions. When Marquis ascend the throne, do not forget about Chancellor and Imperial Uncle.”

Zhao Mu hurriedly expressed his gratitude.

With the sound of the metal chest being locked, the trio left the chamber.

After the residence guards came in to secure the windows and doors and extinguish the candles, Shan Rou whispered into her ear: “What shall we do!”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with deathly calm and softly replied: “The loyalty letters are not urgent. If we can return safely, we will win the battle.”

Xiang Shaolong looks enlightened and is full of vigour.

The lethargy from last night has completely vanished and so has all the doubts in his mind. He is now fully aware about the entire situation ahead of him and the connection between Zhao Mu and Empress Jing.

Tian Zhen had just stepped into his bedroom and noticed that he is awake. She happily scrambled to his side and greeted: “Master Dong! Let me wait on you.”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased and he got up and washed up. He went to the main hall where Teng Yi, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou were having their breakfast.

Teng Yi and Wu Guo masquerading as Dong Kuang purposely stayed at the Command Centre until the third watch. This is the first time they met since he spied on Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Rou Rou should have told you about all that has transpired!”

Teng Yi nodded: “She was very clear. Regarding scheming, we are nowhere near Zhao Mu and Tian Dan’s level. If not for the eavesdropping last night, none of us will return to Xianyang alive.”

Zhao Zhi was worried: “How should we handle their plan to make you harm Lady Ya?”

Xiang Shaolong thought that last night’s episode is like gathering intelligence in 21st century. He smiled: “We can counter every attack they throw at us. The most favourable condition is that they did not suspect my identity as

Dong Kuang and mistaken me as an apple-polisher. Even Zhao Mu dare not reveal our secret relationship. Based on this, we can fight them till the end.”

Teng Yi sighed: “To think that Zhao Ming Xiong is Zhao Mu’s lackey. I have had high hopes for him.”

Xiang Shaolong straightened his neck and solemnly said: “I did not believe that Empress Jing is devoted to Zhao Mu. This vicious woman is likely to use Zhao Mu to achieve her own means. If I can understand her true motives, everything will be fantastic.”

Shan Rou frowned: “You have spoken so much and are unafraid. Do you have a good plan? Empress Jing may summon you anytime to harm Zhao Ya!”

Without restrain, Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders and ate the bun in his hand. He patted Teng Yi on the shoulder and stood up: “We are off to see Lady Ya. Both of you wait here for my return.”

Under Shan Rou’s cursing and Zhao Zhi’s whining, they left the residence.

Riding side by side along the long street, Teng Yi checked: “Should we make new arrangements to the City defences?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and answered: “Nope. This will raise Zhao Ming Xiong and Zhao Mu’s alarm. Please fetch Little Jun back and see what he has to report on the Qi army.”

As they spoke, Zhao Ya’s residence came into view. Xiang Shaolong went into

her place while Teng Yi returned to the Command Centre.

At noon, Zhao Mu sent someone to fetch him. Xiang Shaolong knew about the upcoming plot and expected this.

Inside the secret chamber of the Marquis residence, Zhao Mu put on a look of trust and confidence before declaring: "Li Yuan is tricked and thought that I will cooperate with him. Hng! I will not let him leave Handan City alive."

Xiang Shaolong did not believe a single word that he said but acted delighted instead.

Zhao Mu revealed a sinister smile and inquired: "We can talk about that later. How are you managing Empress Jing and Zhao Ya? Tian Dan mentioned that he met you and Zhao Ya in the same horse carriage last night."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a grin: "Zhao Ya is a born slut. As long as I please her on bed, there is nothing she will not do for me. I am also getting into the good books of Empress Jing. There is something I have yet to report to you. I have killed all the assassins of Prince Xinling. They were hiding with Han Chuang. With this, I have gained the trust of Xiaocheng and gain the favour of Empress Jing, killing two birds with one stone. When we take further actions, there will be fewer hindrances from these two. I am now trying to persuade Xiaocheng to give me the other half of the army seal. Once I have it, I will have full powers to deploy the entire army. Marquis will not have any worry about the rebellion by then."

Zhao Mu was touched as he did not expect this report from Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing to himself.

This traitor has suspected his loyalty as he had kept this incident from him, thinking that he has submitted to Empress Jing. Now that he has been fully honest about the palace robbery, Zhao Mu is at a dilemma and became indecisive.

Zhao Mu stared at him for a while and asked in a deep voice: "Why have you not reported this to me as early as you could?"

Xiang Shaolong innocently responded: "This is a small matter and I have never thought of reporting to you. Only when you asked me about Empress Jing's progress that it came to my mind. The two crucial fixtures are Empress Jing and Zhao Ya. With their full support, Xiaocheng will grant me full military command even with Guo Kai's objection. Then, Handan City will be our playground. Ai! As long as I can repay the gratitude Lord Chunshen has bestowed on me, I, Dong Kuang, am willing to undergo any danger without the slightest hesitation."

Zhao Mu's colour changed and frowned: "Is Xiaocheng behind Le Cheng's death?"

Xiang Shaolong almost burst out laughing: "Definitely not! Tian Dan got me to investigate the personal guards of Le Cheng to see if anyone backed out of his escort on that fateful night. My investigations have yet to be concluded but from what I see, the killer is likely to be Xiang Shaolong."

Zhao Mu can no longer hide his fear and lowered his head in deep thought.

Xiang Shaolong is puzzled. He has said everything that he could to gain Zhao Mu's former trust but it is not working. With a quick inspiration, he roughly guessed what is missing. He mysteriously lowered his voice and whispered: "Does Marquis want Cheng Xu out of the way? I have a marvellous scheme within a scheme."

Zhao Mu raised his head in astonishment: "What scheme within a scheme?"

Xiang Shaolong simply visualized: "I have told Xiaocheng about the loyalty letters and bluffed him that I can steal them. As long as Marquis provides me a fake copy with Cheng Xu's name, Xiaocheng will sack him immediately to protect himself."

When Zhao Mu heard about the leak of the loyalty letters to Xiaocheng, there is no change in his expression. Xiaocheng must have told Empress Jing about the letters who then leaked it to Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief. If he had not made this move, Zhao Mu will never trust him.

Sure enough, Zhao Mu's suspicions gradually dissipated. He sighed: "Wang Zhuo, in the future, you must report everything you did to avoid misunderstandings."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be flustered: "What! Marquis suspects my loyalty?"

Zhao Mu regained his composure and patted his shoulder before adding:

“The storm is over and the weather is good. Do not have any doubts in your heart. As long as you do as I command, you will have a great and prosperous future.”

Pausing for a moment, he continued: “The most important thing now is to retrieve the other half of the army seal and the imperial decree. You can then have full authority to deploy the army anyway you wish...” he stopped halfway.

Xiang Shaolong predicted that he has instructed Empress Jing to use him to harm Zhao Ya but could not say it out from his own mouth or risk exposing their relationship. He sincerely pleaded: “Marquis, please feel free to give any instructions!”

Zhao Mu removed his hand from Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and nodded: “Whatever you plan to do in the future, please discuss with me first. Never forget this.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhao Mu is still having some doubts. Using Empress Jing to command him, he wants to see if Xiang Shaolong will report to him as promised. Xiang Shaolong agreed to Zhao Mu’s request and asked: “Does Marquis have any instructions for summoning me here?”

Zhao Mu looked awkward and forcefully said: “Just to ask how you have been. Oh! We can talk about the rest another time.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that they have each achieved their goals and bade farewell.

Back at the command centre, he attended to his duties first before having a discussion with Teng Yi about Zhao Mu's meeting.

Teng Yi is full of praise: "If the City Guards and the Palace Guards are indirectly controlled by Zhao Mu and Empress Jing at his beck and call, Zhao Mu can rebel without Tian Dan's assistance. I am confused why he had not made his move yet. Is it so difficult to get Empress Jing to poison Xiaocheng?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "I am confused too. The only explanation must be Li Mu. If Xiaocheng died suddenly, Li Mu will be suspicious and send his army into Handan City against Zhao Mu. Even Tian Dan will not dare to face Li Mu's army. Zhao Mu's fantasy will be short-lived. Ai! I still do not believe Empress Jing will be satisfied to be under Zhao Mu's control. She is tasked to unite the three states and knows that Zhao Mu is a Chu spy. There is no way she will submit to him whole-heartedly."

Teng Yi shuddered: "Women like her who are enclosed in the palace for years cannot be judged by the common yardstick. From her looks, even when she is speaking with a smile on her face, you can feel the chill in her heart. Maybe Zhao Mu has an excellent way of fulfilling her desires that she is willing to do everything for him!"

Xiang Shaolong was shaken when he heard this. He has a faint idea of how to deal with Empress Jing but could not put it in words.

Changing the topic, he enquired: "How are the City defences?"

Teng Yi took a deep breath: "Luckily we found out who he is working for. He

handed me a name list this morning about his suggestion to deploy the various military leaders. In the past, I would have no suspicions as he is more familiar with the troops and I trusted him. It is a different matter now.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it is a close shave and commented: “Zhao Mu did mention that he has four colonels who are his lackeys. This must be another trick. We will purposely make full use of these four men so that Zhao Mu can only suffer in silence.”

Teng Yi slapped the table and cried: “Suffer in silence. What a suitable quote! Third Brother you are full of wise proverbs. No wonder Talented Lady Ji has fallen for you.”

A subordinate came to report that Han Chuang is looking for him.

They could guess what is coming and share a laugh before Xiang Shaolong left.

As predicted, it was Empress Jing who is looking for him.

This time, she is alone in a small hut deep inside the residence. There is food and wine on the table and she is chatting happily.

Reminded by Teng Yi, Xiang Shaolong paid attention to her eyes. Despite her joyful expressions, her eyes are expressionless and give people an icy cold feeling.

Is she a cold-blooded animal?

Recalling the times when she teased him and rejected him at the end confirmed this view.

If that is the case, what did Zhao Mu do to conquer her?

Pondering, his hand reached into his waist pockets and retrieves the aphrodisiac Han Chuang gave him that was meant for Ji Yanran and finally understood what Zhao Mu did.

On the last encounter, it did cross his mind to use this tool but it is a fantasy that is limited to one's imagination and would not be put to use. Under the present circumstances, his mindset regarding the use of this drug is different from the past.

His heartbeat uncontrollably quickened.

Empress Jing misunderstood his reaction and jested: "I cause you to be so nervous?"

Using one hand, he swiftly hid a small amount of the drug in his sleeve. Wondering how he could deliver this drug into the lips of this voluptuous beauty, he coughed: "Empress looks especially stunning and mesmerizing today."

Empress Jing eyes flashed. In the past, Xiang Shaolong would never detect this flashing. Now, things are different and she can no longer hide anything from him.

She personally lifted the wine flask and leaned forward, filling his cup. Batting an eye, she sighed: "All guys are the same. After you get used to looking, there will be nothing extraordinary!"

Deep inside, Xiang Shaolong cursed this lady for using this method to seduce him. He had an idea and lifted the cup to his nose proclaiming: "The wine poured by Empress Jing is especially aromatic!" He moved the cup beyond her sight and smoothly added the drug. Raising the cup again with both hands, he toasted: "Let subject toast to the everlasting beauty and youth of Empress."

Which woman does not enjoy men's praising of their beauty? Even Empress Jing is not an exception. Elated, she raised her own cup and toasted: "I bless General Dong with a successful military career and never losing a single battle."

Xiang Shaolong deliberately laugh in a rough manner and explained: "Does Empress know that for tribesmen like us, we must cross our arms to drink during toasting so that our wishes will come true."

Empress Jing held her wine cup in surprise and asked: "What is cross-arm drinking?"

Xiang Shaolong moved forward right to her side and lean ahead slightly. He delivered his wine cup to her lips and grinned: "We cross our arms and drink each other's wine. Not a single drop must be left. Thereby, our wishes will come true."

Empress Jing's face reddened slightly and admired his daring act. If she refused to drink, she would be insincere. Helplessly putting on a smile on her face, she crossed her arms and shot him a look, admonishing: "Watch yourself. I like men who take it slowly. Oh!"

Afraid of choking her, Xiang Shaolong gently poured the wine into her small mouth and drank from her cup at the same time.

After the cups have been emptied, Xiang Shaolong switched the cups on the table and wiped his lips of any remaining wine. He laughed: "Great! In the future, no matter what I have to do for Empress, it will all be worth it."

Empress Jing seldom drank an entire cup of wine in one go. With the effects of alcohol taking over, two red patches appeared on the cheeks of her smooth and well-defined face. She took out a silk handkerchief and covered her face with her sleeve and wiped away the remaining wine from her lips. Lowering her sleeve, she batted an eye at Xiang Shaolong protesting: "I had not drunk wine in such a rush for a long time, you are really ... Oh!"

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to sit down right beside her. He is most afraid that she will slip away and some other guy will benefit from her present state. He interrupted: "Does Empress enjoy drinking in the past?"

For a while, there is a sense of loss in her eyes like she is recalling a sad incident. Sighing softly and yet maintaining her silence, her eyes turned frosty and revealed poisonous anger.

Xiang Shaolong remembered that she had an affair with Prince Xinling. He

guessed that their love must have transformed into hate. Therefore, she had that interesting expression.

He had no inkling about the potency of Han Chuang's aphrodisiac or how long it takes for the drug to take effect. He also did not know what the symptoms of the drug taking effect are. Full of questions, he kept quiet.

For some time the little hut is in complete silence. On the sounds of magpies playing and fluttering their wings can be heard from the garden.

Finally, Empress Jing coldly started: "Are you thinking about another woman?"

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and raised his head to face her. He tested: "Empress is brilliant. I am really thinking about women. But it is not another woman, it is Empress Jing."

Empress Jing's face turned red again and gazed at him. She proceeds to face the sun-filled woods beyond the window.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the drug is taking effect. Otherwise, her complexion will not change as easily.

Sliding to her back, he had wanted to hold her shoulders. Afraid of retaliation, he softly spoke: "Does Empress have something on her mind?"

This Queen of Zhao unhappily sighed: "Sometimes, I have no idea what I am doing. Why am I expending so much effort on an insignificant issue? Look at

the trees and flowers outside. They remain so carefree under the rays of the sun. If I can abandon all my worries, life will be a paradise.”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. She has just taken an aphrodisiac and should be full of passion and be begging him for sex. Why is she expressing all her woes instead? Could it be that Han Chuang gave him the wrong medication or the drug has expired and cause a different reaction? Thinking back, he realised his error.

If Zhao Mu has been feeding her constantly with sex drugs to keep her passion up, she would have developed some immunity to it. Like a common drug abuser, they need to increase the dosage to keep them ‘high’. He kicked himself for only doping her with a small amount. There is no way he can get her to drink another cup of his wine. What shall he do?

Chapter 6

The Deciding Factor

While Xiang Shaolong is still undecided, Empress Jing stood up. He was expecting her to storm out in a huff; instead, she walked slowly to the window and released a long breath, gazing at the trees and flowers. Xiang Shaolong followed her lead and leaned on the window sill, scrutinizing her chiselled face.

Although her face is peach-red, her mesmerizing eyes show that she is still dwelling on her past. Switching between happiness, anger, sadness and pain is all alternating on her face.

Xiang Shaolong is sure that the drug is taking effect, causing her to reveal her hidden and suppressed expressions. She has even forgotten her original intention to get Xiang Shaolong to harm Zhao Ya.

This Queen of Zhao seems to be in a trance as if she has taken some mind-altering medication. Exhibiting an unusual side of her, she seems to have lost her normal will power and sense of preparedness.

Xiang Shaolong plucked up his courage and reached out with his hand around her soft and tender shoulder. “What is Her Majesty thinking about?” he soothingly asked.

Empress Jing appears to be immune to his touch. Shaking her head, she cried:

“I hate him!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and coaxed: “Who dares to offend Your Majesty? Hei! Do you want another cup of wine?”

Irritated, Empress Jing scowled: “Wouldn’t drinking wine make me feel even worse than before?!” She did not even turn her head and stared at him through the corner of her eye.

Xiang Shaolong has a guilty conscience and dare not incur her wrath. Releasing his grip on her shoulder, he nodded: “Yes! If you cut water with a knife, the water will still flow on. If you drink, the alcohol entering your upset liver will be transformed into tears.”

Unknowingly, he sprouted a line from Li Bai, the great Tang Dynasty Poet. Due to his limited memory, the verse is modified and doesn’t make any sense.

Empress Jing muttered: “If you cut water with a knife, the water will still flow on. If you drink, the alcohol entering your upset liver will be transformed into tears.” Her curvy figure started to shake and she faced him with her eyes shining with coldness.

Xiang Shaolong is so nervous that his hands and feet turned into ice. He cursed himself for acting like an unrefined boor and yet came up with a fantastic line like that.

The chill in her eyes faded rapidly as Empress Jing sighed: “What a moving

verse! It is subtle but yet pleasing to the ear. For so many years, this is the first time I am touched by poetry.” Ending, her face became even more reddish.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved. He is certain that she was recollecting her past with Prince Xinling, causing her pretty eyes to turn cold. It appears that Prince Xinling has dealt her such a heavy blow that she is still unable to let go after so many years. Her tryst with Zhao Mu is likely to be a form of revenge. In this case, she must be ignorant about Han Chuang’s and Prince Xinling’s conspiracy.

Prince Xinling gained her true love while Zhao Mu is all about perverted satisfaction and excitement.

After they gazed at each other for some time, Empress Jing warmed up and state in a low voice: “Dong Kuang! You are a special man.”

Xiang Shaolong tested the waters by reaching over and holding her snow white jade hands. Her hands are well-manicured with long fingernails.

Empress Jing rotated slightly and allowed her precious hand to land in this man’s grasp.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is about to pull her into his embrace, Empress Jing retracted her hand. Her delicate eyes show signs of awakening as she coldly snorted: “Does General Dong know why I have summoned you?”

Xiang Shaolong was dismayed that the effects of the drug are subsidizing and

this woman is recovering her usual clarity. He nodded: "Please give your orders and I will not fail you."

Xiang Shaolong left Han Chuang's residence and headed to Zhao Mu's residence at once. The traitor is not at home and he left a message and head back to the Command Centre to liaise with Teng Yi. After his report, he sighed: "There are bound to be some setbacks. Now, we can only rely on military might. I thought that we can seduce her and break Zhao Mu's sexual control over her. Who knows...! Ai!"

Teng Yi reassured: "She has not given you the 'evidence' to plant in Lady Ya's residence. When you meet up again, just increase the dosage."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "First, we may not be drinking. Second, I am not used to such methods to deal with women. Forget it! It is better than Ya'er leave Handan City and we have one less consideration."

Teng Yi informed: "Talented Lady Ji just sent word that she has informed Xiaocheng that she will return to Wei tomorrow. From what I see, her departure will stir up some debates and speculation, especially from Li Yuan and Lord Longyang."

Xiang Shaolong could understand his meaning.

This selfish and devious Li Yuan will not give up on an opportunity that is within his reach. Lord Longyang will suspect that she is leaving to rendezvous with Xiang Shaolong.

Her leaving of Handan City will not be as smooth as expected.

Teng Ti added; “You need not fret over Yanran. I have made arrangements. Earlier, I have sent someone to move the Tian sisters secretly to the farm. Tomorrow, they can escape to Xianyang with Mister Zou (Yan).”

Xiang Shaolong is still worried: “How will you deal with Lord Longyang and Li Yuan?”

Teng Yi explained: “Lord Longyang will not resort to force with Talented Lady. He will only send spies to observe in secret. He will also notify the Wei border guards to track her movement. As long as we do not allow his men to reach Wei, everything will be taken care of.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded at his brilliance. With him controlling the City Guards, killing Lord Longyang’s spies is a piece of cake.

Teng Yi continued: “From my estimates, Li Yuan may resort to force when necessary. He cannot send his own men to attack her and can only ask Tian Dan for assistance. I will personally escort Talented Lady Ji and Zou Yan with an army of Zhao soldiers. We will lay down a decoy and send them to Han instead. This will take care of Li Yuan’s ploy.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Yanran is not a common and weak woman. She is full of wisdom and strength to protect herself. Let Big Brother see to this. I still need you her to watch over Zhao Ming Xiong and company. We must pay extra attention to the men on Zhao Ming Xiong’s name list.”

Teng Yi asked: “There is something that I still do not comprehend. Why would Zhao Mu want to get the Qi army involved? With Xiaocheng’s death, he will be in power. Killing Li Mu and Lian Po will be easy, not to mention idiots like Guo Kai and Cheng Xu. I am certain that he still suspects Empress Jing and treats you like a pawn. His real trust should lie with Zhao Ming Xiong and not an outsider like you. He can even blame you for opening the gates to the Qi army and killed Tian Dan and Li Yuan at the same time. No one is better than Zhao Mu in understanding the ambitions of Qi and Chu against the Three State Ally.”

Xiang Shaolong ran these thoughts in his head and nodded: “Second Brother is right. Zhao Mu will never be satisfied with our independent attitude. But things are too complicated and Tian Dan, Li Yuan will surely have a plot against Zhao Mu. We can only react to whatever situations that arises and wait for a golden opportunity to whisk away Zhao Mu. The most pressing thing is to get Zhao Ya to leave Handan City and all will be better.”

An attendant reported that Zhao Mu is here personally to see him and both men were stunned.

Teng Yi excused himself as the guards brought Zhao Mu in. Escorting him were the leader of Zhao Mohism Juzi Yan Ping and eight other elite warriors that Xiang Shaolong has seen before.

Xiang Shaolong gave them a warm welcome and paid his respects to Yan Ping like he is seeing him for the first time. Recalling their first encounter in Zhao Mu’s residence, he guessed that Yan Ping is now allied with Zhao Mu.

This Zhao Mohism Juzi has lost some weight and his eyes are more sharper. It looks like after his loss to Xiang Shaolong, he made a lot of effort to train. Not only has he regained his wounded pride, his skills are at a higher level now.

Xiang Shaolong was in agony. If Yan Ping and his men are Zhao Mu's bodyguards, dealing with this traitor will be so much harder.

The three men were seated as tea is served and Zhao Mu's personal escorts guarded the four directions.

Zhao Mu gave a dry cough: "Juzi is my esteemed guest who will be dealing with Xiang Shaolong. He has brought three hundred followers who are all formidable people. If Xiang Shaolong did not come, so be it. If he is here, he will not leave Handan City intact."

Xiang Shaolong feigned happiness and said: "If Juzi needs any assistance, please let me know."

Yan Ping let out a solemn chuckle and commented in a low voice: "After Marquis heard of his return, we have been guarding every pass and waiting for him to fall into our traps. We did not even catch his shadow, which is extremely strange. From our sources, he is definitely not in Xianyang."

Zhao Mu interrupted: "Xiang Shaolong injured some people near Handan City and escaped. Juzi led his men in pursuit to the vicinity of Wei but did not discover any tracks. Juzi concluded that Xiang Shaolong is still in the city and is linked to Le Cheng's assassination."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. No wonder Zhao Mu is generally unworried about Xiang Shaolong returning to Handan City. He has Yan Ping as his secret weapon against Xiang Shaolong. It is fortunate that he has regained Zhao Mu's trust so that Zhao Mu revealed Yan Ping's presence to him.

He has been too careless and neglected Yan Ping this huge foe.

With his eyes brimming with chill, Yan Ping coldly added: "We have searched all the nearby forests and villages and there is no sign of him. The only explanation is he is hiding in the city under someone's protection."

Xiang Shaolong acted aghast: "Juzi's theories make good sense! Who does Juzi suspect to be hiding him?"

Yan Ping looked at Zhao Mu before divulging: "Only Zhao Ya has the ability to hide Xiang Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong declared: "Let me send some men to watch her around the clock. We will surely find a loophole. Hai! She says I am the only man in her heart. So I am only a cover while she is really with her old sweetheart."

Zhao Mu reasoned: "Juzi has the same analysis. Let him handle Zhao Ya's supervision. If you send your men, they will not be able to hide from Zhao Ya's family warriors."

Yan Ping stood up and bade: "Excuse me General Dong; I have some matters to attend to."

As Xiang Shaolong escorted him to the main gate, Yan Ping lowered his voice saying: "Xiang Shaolong would not dare to spend too much time here. I believe he will attack Marquis within a few days. If we are well prepared, we need not fear him."

Xiang Shaolong could only agree but is actually full of misery. Yan Ping's presence will only add to the burden of his mission.

After seeing Yan Ping off, Xiang Shaolong returned to Zhao Mu and reported Empress Jing's ploy to harm Zhao Ya. He frowned: "We can easily dispose of this slut. The issue is she recommended my promotion to City Commander. In a twist of events, or because she is not there to put in a good word for me, Xiaocheng may not give me the army seal. This will affect our grand plan."

Zhao Mu is satisfied that Xiang Shaolong reported his session with Empress Jing and smiled: "When we get the army seal, we will dispose of Zhao Ya. You can delay Empress Jing's orders. Hng! I have laid my plans well and can succeed the Zhao empire anytime. The present issue is Xiaocheng's precautions. The palace guards are all controlled by him. If we cannot use trickery, we shall have to use force. Before Li Mu returns, we must send him to heaven."

Hearing this update, Xiang Shaolong understood Zhao Mu's schemes.

Trickery is to use poison. Xiaocheng will die because of illness and this is the best outcome.

Zhao Mu and Empress Jing must have been trying to poison him but they

have been unsuccessful. Xiaocheng knew that Zhao Mu is a poisons expert and will take due precautions.

Force is to use the Zhao army and force their way into the palace. After killing Xiaocheng, they will install the crown prince on the throne.

This is the worst outcome as he needs to rely on the Qi army to deflect the returning army of Li Mu.

Zhao Mu lowered his voice: “No matter what, I have covered all the details of either scheme. Let’s talk more the next time. You should spend more time talking to Xiaocheng. He is easily persuaded. Who knows he might give you the army seal after you chatted more with him.”

Pausing, he asked: “I heard that Talented Lady Ji is heading back to Wei, even before Lord Longyang. Have you heard about this?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be astounded and cried: “What!?”

Zhao Mu chuckled: “That is a piece of great news. Li Yuan will not let go of the heavenly maiden. If he chased after her and resort to force, we can use this excuse to kill him. We can even push the blame to Ji Yanran and let Li Yuan be an horny ghost!”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. It is no wonder Xiaocheng dare not act against Zhao Mu. This latter does have his cruel methods that act as a deterrent.

Arriving at Lady Ya's residence, Zhao Ya brought him to the unforgettable loft.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her eyes were bloodshot and appeared to have been crying. "What is wrong?" He curiously asked.

Zhao Ya fell into his embrace whining: "I just had a big fight with Xiaocheng."

After Xiang Shaolong got her to calm down, she recounted: "This morning, you spoke to me about Empress Jing and Zhao Mu's conspiracy. I could not tolerate it and enter the palace, telling Xiaocheng to watch the people around him. He mistaken me for badmouthing Guo Kai and blew his top. I screwed him for misusing his talents and he cursed me for loving you."

Xiang Shaolong felt uneasy and anxiously asked: "Did you tell him about Empress Jing?"

Zhao Ya shook her head: "What is the use of saying it? I have no evidence and he will mistake me for wanting to harm her."

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to persuade Zhao Ya to leave Zhao. In her pitiful state, how he can bring this matter up? In that instance, he did not know what to say.

Zhao Ya raised her head and smiled bitterly: "It is a good quarrel nonetheless. As soon as I came home, the imperial decree came. I was ordered to leave for Daliang (Wei Capital) immediately and will be travelling with Miss Yanran."

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: “What is your mission to Daliang? Are you not frightened of Prince Xinling?”

Zhao Ya felt his face with her hand and loving cooed: “Luckily you still care for me or I’ll be better off dead. My current mission is to bring the fourth princess to marry the Crown Prince of Wei. On the surface, it is to replace your Qian’er but it is really a transaction. The dowry is the original copy of Lu Gong’s Secret Manual. Lord Longyang’s current trip is also to discuss this marriage.”

Xiang Shaolong just couldn’t figure out. “Why did your brother agree?” He asked.

Zhao Ya sighed: “He has no choice. Qi and Chu are giving him a lot of pressure. Without Wei’s support, what can Zhao and Han achieve? He had long wanted to send me over but I know that you are coming back so I refused to go. Now that we have such a bitter fight, he no longer cares if I am willing or unwilling to go.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “This is great! You can slip over to Xianyang while travelling.”

Zhao Ya shook her head strongly: “I want my life too but this matter is of great importance. I must finish it at all costs before I can leave for Xianyang in peace. After that, I will not owe Xiaocheng anything. Ai! Xiaocheng is not like this in the past. After Lady Ni’s tragic death, he became very bad-tempered.”

Remembering the exquisite Lady Ni, Xiang Shaolong’s spirits took a beating

and he sighed: “Prince Xinling hates you to the core and will try to harm you.”

Zhao Ya kept quiet for a while and softly said: “Does hubby know what Empress Jing and I are on such bad terms?”

Xiang Shaolong guessed: “Because of Prince Xinling?”

A guilty Zhao Ya nodded and faintly remarked: “I do not wish to bring up the past. Prince Xinling still has feelings for me. That is why his men attacked the palace when they knew I was away. Moreover, Lord Longyang guaranteed my safety. He will be travelling with us.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished. “Isn’t your brother sending him off with a banquet on the day after tomorrow? How can he leave before that?”

Zhao Ya bitterly smiled: “Are you that simple-minded? He does not believe that Talented Lady Ji is really returning to Daliang. He sensed that she is taking the chance to flee and meet up with Xiang Shaolong. Miss Ji does not know about this yet. Ai! Shaolong! What should Yanran do?”

Xiang Shaolong’s brain is throbbing with pain. A simple departure has made everything so complicated. If Yanran knows about this, she will be furious.

His responsibilities are overwhelming and he struggles to handle them all.

Zhao Ya sighed again: “We have to be apart for some time and may not even see each other again. Ya’er does not wish to live anymore. Why is life so difficult?”

Xiang Shaolong forced his headaches aside and raises his energy, asking:
“Does Xiaocheng have another son?”

Zhao Ya shook her head: “There is only a crown prince. Therefore, no matter who badmouths that woman (Empress Jing), Xiaocheng will not be affected.”

Xiang Shaolong continued to probe: “Does Xiaocheng have any siblings?”

Zhao Ya was surprised as she stared at him. After a moment, she replied:
“There is Prince of Wu City. Wu City is just a few days travelling away from Qi. You can reach there in two days if you rush the trip. Are you suspecting that he is conspiring with Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong’s face is full of suspicions as he assessed: “I definitely do not trust Tian Dan to help Zhao Mu ascend the throne without his own benefits. If I am Tian Dan, I will not believe that Zhao Mu can control Empress Jing. And Empress Jing is not likely to get rid of Zhao’s supporting pillars Lian Po and Li Mu. The best way is to tempt Prince Wu and get rid of Zhao Mu, Empress Jing and the Crown Prince in one swoop. Zhao Mu will be the scapegoat. He will then kill Li Mu and Lian Po through Prince Wu. Zhao will then be in his hands. Therefore, he needs to kill me first to highlight his brilliance. He surely does not believe that I will work for him.”

Zhao Ya thought about his words. Her face changed colour and uttered:
“Shaolong, you are right. This brother (Prince Wu) of mine is a greedy fellow and does harbour thoughts of rebellion. What can we do?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Regardless, Tian Dan can plot against you; we can

plot against him too. Do not let anyone know about this. I naturally will have a plan to counter this. Forget all your worries and leave this place tomorrow. Wait for my news in Daliang and never come back to Handan City.”

Zhao Ya bit her lips: “You are not keeping me company tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her petite face and smiled: “There are many opportunities in the future. These few days are crucial to our success and I cannot indulge in pleasures of the flesh. Do you know there are people watching you?”

He shared about the presence of Yan Ping and reassured her at the same time. He then left to visit Xiaocheng in the palace.

The palace attendant reported that Xiaocheng is unwell and has retired early. Xiang Shaolong decided to see Empress Jing since he was here.

All of a sudden, he came to realise that the success or failure of his mission in Handan City lies solely in the hands of this cunning Queen of Zhao.

Chapter 7

Filled With Plans from Head to Toe

Empress Jing received Dong Kuang in that secluded pavilion in the imperial gardens. After being seated, Xiang Shaolong said, " Lady Ya has informed me that she is headed to Daliang tomorrow, so tonight is the only chance to make our move against her. All I need to do is find a valid excuse to head to her residence and I will carry out the task. Empress Jing, have you prepared the necessary materials?"

A poisonous look flashed across the Empress of Zhao's eyes. After hesitating for a moment, she finally sighed. "She should consider herself lucky. We'll consider this matter to have come to an end now."

Xiang Shaolong's heart trembled slightly. He realized that this noble lady and and Zhao Mu must have some sort of secretive yet effective system of communication between them. That's why she was able to find out so quickly that there has been a change in the situation.

Just as he was considering the best way to awaken her to the possibility of Prince Wucheng's rebellion, Empress Jing mournfully sighed, "'When wine passes through worries, it transforms into tears.' Today, I've been incessantly thinking about this moving line. I can't motivate myself to do anything."

Based upon all the information he had gathered, Xiang Shaolong was now capable of drawing a rough sketch of the history and person of this First Lady

of Zhao.

After being married off to the country of Zhao and becoming the Empress, her task was to maintain and strengthen the alliance of the three countries. In addition, she faithfully gave the people of Zhao their one and only Crown Prince.

Everything should have been perfect, but a problem appeared in the form of King Xiaocheng. Because of his love for other men, he neglected her.

Empress Jing definitely was not a promiscuous woman. Although King Xiaocheng didn't keep a tight watch on her, she nonetheless followed all the rules of propriety, living a lonely life at court. This sort of woman, once she truly falls in love, becomes an even more hopeless case when compared to how promiscuous women act.

The person who made her truly fall in love was Prince Xinling. The latter was just putting on an act to gain personal benefit for himself. For the sake of politics, he put on a show for her, while the person he really cared for was Zhao Ya. Naturally, after Empress Jing discovered this, she suffered a wound which, to this very day, had not yet been healed.

Zhao Mu, seeing the opportunity, used King Xiaocheng's indulgence for all sorts of 'games' to acquire a stockpile of many different medicines, which he used to arouse her sexual desire. He caused herself to wallow in wanton despair and become willing to do anything for him.

Empress Jing harbored a deep hatred towards King Xiaocheng, and in

addition, she wasn't a woman without ambition. The powerful and yet subtle relationships which develop between male and female caused her and Zhao Mu to use each other for mutual benefit, spurring each other on to greater depravities.

No one can deny that Zhao Mu is a very attractive, mesmerizing man. He had ways for seducing both men and women. Otherwise, before Zhao Ya fell in love with Xiang Shaolong, she wouldn't have found herself unable to resist Zhao Mu's seductions and teases.

If, hypothetically, he, Xiang Shaolong, was able to win over Empress Jing to his side, Zhao Mu's biggest supporter would be gone, and the task of capturing him would become much easier as well. When he thought of this, he couldn't help but let out a sigh. To have a happy, peaceful life in this era, the only option was to stop at nothing and use any methods available to achieve his goal.

Staring at him, Empress Jing said, "Why are you sighing?"

Xiang Shaolong, when thinking of the unscrupulous, underhanded tactics he was going to have to use, felt no desire for her at the moment. He dully said, "I don't know either."

Empress Jing didn't expect him to reply in such a manner. Astounded, she said, "You are very frank."

Both of them were silent for some time. After the two stared at each other for some time, Empress Jing found herself somewhat unable to withstand his

scorching gaze. Lowering her head, she said, "You really are willing to listen to my orders to frame Zhao Ya? I thought you liked her? All men like women like her, who know how to satisfy them in bed."

Xiang Shaolong understand what she was thinking. He ruggedly replied, "To ask me to frame the innocent really is something I am reluctant to do. I'd rather kill her with a chop of the sword and do things neatly and cleanly. At worst, I would have to flee from Handan afterwards and in such a manner, repay you, Empress Jing, for the kindness you showed in promoting me."

Empress Jing's entire body trembled as she stared at him. Her phoenix-like eyes quivering with a fierce look in them, she replied with cold formality, "So you have the audacity to act against my instructions?"

Xiang Shaolong used the technique of using 'soft' to overcome 'hard'. He let out another sigh. "I, Dong Kuang, am willing to sacrifice my livelihood and even my very life for you, Empress Jing. Empress, are you still not satisfied? Why is there such deep hatred between yourself and Lady Ya?"

Empress Jing's face turned icy. "You aren't qualified to get involved in the grudge between myself and her."

Seeing that she was no longer criticizing him over resisting her orders, Xiang Shaolong knew that she had already softened towards him. At this moment, he was riding on the tiger's back, with no way to get off. If he didn't use extraordinary measures to subdue her, it would be very difficult to anticipate the consequences. Zhao Ya was an excellent example of how difficult it is to fathom and understand the minds of these women, who have lived in the

palace for so long. Suddenly, she issued an order of expulsion. "General Dong, if you have no further business here, you have my leave to depart!"

Xiang Shaolong rose to his feet. Taking two angry steps away, he spoke to her with his back turned, "Empress Jing, do you know that disaster is so near that it is pressing at your eyelashes?"

Empress Jing's tender body trembled slightly. Laughing coldly, she said, "General Dong, if you are just saying frightening words to try and scare me, I definitely will not let you off."

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders, not appearing to care in the slightest. "If that's the case, please allow me to take back the words I said earlier. Starting today, I, Dong Kuang, no longer owe you, Empress Jing, anything further. If the Empress wishes to take Dong Kuang's life, go ahead and give the order!"

Empress Jing exploded with anger. Rising to her feet, her lovable voice shouted, "What audacity! How dare you speak to me with that sort of attitude? Do you believe me when I tell you that I will immediately call for someone to come and pull your tongue out by the roots?"

Xiang Shaolong swiftly turned around and stared at her, shooting her a gaze filled with cold electricity. His appearance suddenly became powerful without compare. He replied, "I, Dong Kuang, have never considered life or death to be a matter of great importance. If all I wanted to do was make you happy, it would be very easy for me to ignore my conscience and just say words pleasing to the ear. But no matter who I am willing to lie to, I, Dong

Kuang, am not willing to deceived my beloved Empress Jing. That's the reason why I spoke those words from the heart. I didn't expect that I would gain only your disfavor. Forget it! It's no big deal if I can no longer be the city commander. At first, I was able to carry out some things on your behalf. It is a pity that things are the way they are. I'm going to go to the King now and return to him the imperial seal for commanding troops. I no longer wish to concern myself with the affairs of Handan."

When had Empress Jing ever been rebuked directly in such a way by anyone before? For the moment, she was stunned and speechless. But upon hearing the overbearing power of his impassioned speech, her heart actually softened. She only tightened her tender face and said, "Fine! Since you are so straightforward, go ahead and tell me these words from the depths of your heart. I will respectfully listen to them."

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt great joy. Deciding to stop while he was ahead, he disappointedly sighed, "Right now, your servant's heart is dejected and downcast. I don't wish to say anything at all. Empress Jing, call for someone to come take me away! I definitely will not resist."

Empress Jing was briefly stunned. Leaving the table, she came to his side. After her slender, beautiful face closely examined his own for a moment, she let out a light sigh. "Why do you have to be so angry with me? Even if you don't care about your own life, you should think about the needs of your followers in Handan! Even the King cannot protect you from being punished for offending your betters."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the time was right. Deep emotion flowing from his

eyes, he shook his head. "I don't know why I was unable to control myself either. I only felt that if Empress Jing were to wrongly think badly of me, that I would...bah! I don't know what to say."

Empress Jing was stunned at first. Then, she let out a tinkling laugh, the sound of silver bells chiming. Stretching her hands out, she pressed them against his broad chest. In a low voice, she said, "No need for you to explain. Of course I understand what you mean."

Feeling her precious hands gently touch and stroke him, Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a surge of desire. He comfortably closed his eyes. In a soft voice, he said, "Empress Jing, please don't be like this. Otherwise, I won't be able to control myself and will violate you."

Giggling with laughter, Empress Jing said, "Just now, weren't you acting so mean and ferocious that you looked as though you were going to devour me whole? Why are you now trembling with fear? Eek! No!"

Xiang Shaolong had waited for just such a good opportunity. It felt like he had been waiting for centuries. Why be polite for any longer? He roughly pulled her into his embrace and pressed his lips against her fragrant neck and shoulder.

How could Empress Jing have imagined that he would be so rough and daring? She thought that he would be as proper as he had been in the past. By the time she thought to try and struggle free, she found herself lost within this man's charisma and his depredations of her.

Xiang Shaolong ardently and fiercely kissed this 'First Lady' as his hands roamed across her buttocks without any scruple or reservation, holding her so tightly that she almost found herself unable to breathe.

Only by breaking down the barriers between man and woman would he be able to break down Zhao Mu's control over her. This was similar to how Zhao Mu himself subdued her. These arrogant palace noblewomen lacked for nothing at all, but it was precisely because they lacked no material goods that they couldn't help but feel that their hearts were empty. If he could compensate for this defect in her heart, it would be the same as winning her affection. His freedom of action would become much greater, with the difference between as great as that between the clouds of heaven and the mud of the earth. Although there was some deception involved, how many times had she used the same sort of seductive deception against him? To him, this was just another battlefield!

In the blink of an eye, Empress Jing began to react ardently.

Xiang Shaolong's lust was tremendous, especially when he thought about her high and lofty status, as the Empress of the nation. But, knowing that she had suffered a deep psychological wound in the past, it wouldn't do to proceed with undue haste. When both of them were out of breathe from each other's kisses, he said in a low voice, "Empress Jing, do you know about the conspiracy between Prince Wucheng, Tian Dan, and Zhao Mu?"

Empress Jing, whose body was still ensconced in his arms, suddenly trembled violently. The lust in her phoenix-like eyes suddenly dissipated. Staring at him, she cried out involuntarily, "What?!"

Xiang Shaolong's arms around her tightened. In a soft voice, he said, "Empress Ding, you really underestimated Tian Dan and Zhao Mu. Do you think that it never crossed their minds that after the Crown Prince ascends to the throne, all power would be concentrated in your hands? In addition, everyone knows that you won't be so stupid as to destroy the base of your military security by executing Li Mu and Lian Po, the pillars supporting the country of Zhao. At that point in time, wouldn't Tian Dan have wasted all of his efforts for no gain? It is precisely because they have ulterior motives that they find themselves 100% confident in their actions."

Their two bodies were still entangled with one another's, but Empress Jing had already totally recovered her normal clarity of thought. She calmly said, "Where did you get this news from?"

Rousing his own spirit, Xiang Shaolong said, "From the first time Tian Dan met me, he wanted to win me over to his side. After you promoted me to the rank of City Commander, I sought him out and held secret talks with him. I pretended to be loyal to him, to see what secrets and plans he had. That is how I heard about this secret."

A sharp light shone out of Empress Jing's eyes as she stared at him without blinking. Xiang Shaolong matched the intensity of her gaze, not budging in the slightest. A slightly ridiculing tone to her voice, the beautiful woman replied, "I didn't realize that Horse Fanatic Dong was so very skilled at deceiving people. Mmph!"

Xiang Shaolong once again sealed off her lips with his own.

This time, Xiang Shaolong stopped after only a quick taste. He boldly said, "For the sake of Empress Jing, it's no big deal if I deceive someone. But there is one thing I do not understand. The King is not in the best of health. I'm afraid that he doesn't have much time left to him. Empress Jing, why don't you just wait for a short period of time longer, instead of taking on such a risk?"

Empress Jing had been kissed by him until her entire body went limp. Panting, she said, "If I were to wait a few more years, the country of Zhao will have been lost because of this blockhead."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly saw the light, realizing that she had the same line of thought as him. No wonder she was willing to collude with Zhao Mu.

With a slightly begging tone to her voice, Empress Jing said, "Let go of me, alright? There's a lot of things I need to discuss with you!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself that he might as well go all out. If he didn't seize this opportunity to conquer her, he feared that he wouldn't have such a good opportunity again. Just as he was about to launch a fierce 'attack', a palace lady's voice came from the staircase. "The palace servant, Zhang Jiguang has come to report that the King is waiting for General Dong in the inner palace."

The two were feeling guilty due to their sordid actions. They hurriedly separated.

Forcing herself to calm down, Empress Jing said, "General Dong will go

immediately. Have him wait just a moment." Giving him a glance, she said in a low voice, "No matter what, don't let the King know what just happened. When dusk falls, go to Han Chuang's residence. I have business to discuss with you."

Xiang Shaolong found it unimaginable that he once again lost the chance to taste the Empress of Zhao, despite her having been literally at his lips. Lamenting at the situation, he left disappointed.

The palace servant, Zhang Jiguang, led him into a sturdy building within the inner palace. In a low voice, he said, "The King just woke up. When he heard that you came to visit him, he immediately ordered me to bring you to him."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the servant had covered up his visit to Empress Jing. He immediately expressed his gratitude.

Jiguang said, "Right now, everyone in the palace holds General Dong in the utmost esteem. If it wasn't for you quickly capturing those villains, who knows how many more of us would have met with disaster."

Xiang Shaolong made a few modest remarks, before seizing the opportunity to ask, "Aside from General Cheng, who amongst the palace guards holds the most authority?"

Upon hearing Cheng Xu's name, Jiguang revealed a look of disdain. "It would of course be the chief guard, General Zhao Lingpian. His popularity, prestige, and record of service all surpass that of General Cheng. But because he doesn't know how to curry favor with Chief Advisor Guo, he's never been

given great authority."

Xiang Shaolong didn't expect him to speak so openly about internal affairs. Staring at him in astonishment, he nodded. "Palace servant Zhang, you really speak boldly and forthrightly!"

Jiguang smiled. "I speak based on my judgment of the person I am speaking with. Right now, everyone in Handan knows that Horse Fanatic Dong is an amazing hero who does not tremble at the sight of power and influence. If our country of Great Zhao had a few more heroes like General Dong, why would we fear the rapacious, predator-like Qin?"

Xiang Shaolong clapped him on the shoulder. "I simply must make a friend of you, palace servant Zhang! I'll probably have favors that I need you to help me with over the next two days as well."

They stopped talking as they crossed over the threshold of the door. Passing by two palace guardians, they entered the room to meet with King Xiaocheng.

After paying respects to the monarch, each of them seated themselves. Before he had a chance to speak, King Xiaocheng ordered all the guards to leave before saying in a low voice, "Do you have any good news to report on the oaths of loyalty?"

Xiang Shaolong closely examined his face. Although he looked a bit tired, he didn't look as bad as he had imagined. "The number of guards patrolling the Marquis' residence suddenly increased dramatically, and Tian Dan gifted him

with ten giant hounds that are particularly sharp of eye and keen of nose. Aside from forcibly entering the residence, there's really no way in. If my guess is correct, someone has leaked the news out to him, causing Zhao Mu to become wary of me."

King Xiaocheng was stunned for a moment, before revealing a pondering look in his eyes. After a long time, he said, "There's only a very few number of people who know about this, and We have ordered them to guard this secret carefully. Who would dare to disobey Our commands?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Maybe I'm being overly suspicious. Perhaps Zhao Mu is simply increasing his guards due to the critical time about to come to pass."

King Xiaocheng's expression changed quickly. In a heavy voice, he said, "The great general is about to return in a few days' time. If Zhao Mu wishes to rebel, he must make his move in these next few days. General Dong, have you received any intelligence on this front?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "He once mentioned that he will need to borrow support from the men of Qi to accomplish the deed. Based on this, I imagine he has a full and complete set of plans to allow the men of Qi to easily enter the city. Oh! Not good!"

King Xiaocheng was alarmed. "General Dong, what did you just think of?"

What Xiang Shaolong had suddenly thought of was Zhao Mingxiong, that internal traitor. With him acting as cover, it wouldn't be hard at all to sneak a group of men from under the walls through the Wu family tunnels. No

wonder that Zhao Mu, when he suspected 'Dong Kuang' of betraying him, still appeared so confident and unconcerned. This really was not good at all. Although he thought of this, he dared not say it. He lied, "I believe that this very night, Zhao Mu will initiate the first of his chain-plans of attack. He will assassinate the ministers and generals opposed to him to cause confusion in the hearts of the soldiers and the civilians. I must make preparations."

This was also very much a possibility. When he thought of this, he suddenly felt very uneasy. But before they had concluded their talks, he dared not rashly depart.

King Xiaocheng's face turned white. Gasping with astonishment, he said, "Make the first strike to seize the initiative! Right now, we can't hold too many scruples. General Dong, order your men to go and capture or kill Zhao Mu. If he is going to be disloyal to me, there's no need for me to be faithful to him. No one can blame Us for being ruthless to him."

Although Xiang Shaolong's heart was burning with anxiety, he forced himself to be calm as he explained, "Highness, you are absolutely correct. That is the most direct, straightforward way to deal with things. But right now, we still don't know how many of the palace or city guards are traitors. If Zhao Mu gets a wind of the plan and makes his move first, launching an attack in unison with Tian Dan and Li Yuan's forces, it will be very hard to determine who will win and who will lose. Today, Zhao Mu introduced me to the Mohist Juzi, Yan Ping. This extremely talented Mohist swordsman alone will be very difficult for us to deal with. When combined with the thousands of men Zhao Mu has under him, the situation looks very grim.

Upon hearing the names Tian Dan, Li Yuan, and Yan Ping, King Xiaocheng's face turned ashen. At a loss as to what to do, he complained, "Are you saying we should just sit here and do nothing until he calls up his men and revolts?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly grumbled to himself that all of Zhao Mu's resources and power were nurtured by the King himself. And now, the King wants to blame him? He calmly replied, "Although your humble servant has become the City Commander, I only have the authority to command the troops in dealing with routine matters of city security. I cannot deploy the troops as I see fit, much less command the troops stationed outside of the capital. If, theoretically, you were to give me the army seal, I would be able to strengthen our defenses and concentrate our forces within the city, while having all of the critical choke points and passageways manned by people I trust. At that point in time, we would no longer need to fear the forces outside of the city. Perhaps we would even be able to slaughter Tian Dan and Li Yuan at the same time."

King Xiaocheng hesitated for a long while, before saying in a trembling voice, "Tian Dan and Li Yuan are important officials of the kingdoms of Qi and Chu. Do not take any rash actions before I consult with generals Lian Po and Li Mu."

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed to himself that this was such a pity. He knew that the King was just finding an excuse. He now better understood why Empress Jing said that the kingdom of Zhao would be lost under his rule. If you wish to accomplish great things, how can you be so full of misgivings and vacillate on what to do?

King Xiaocheng suddenly rose to his feet. "Fine! We will give you the army seal, so that you can act with full authority!"

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly knelt down to thank him.

At this point in time, the hatred he felt for the King of Zhao had already become very dull and light. It had been replaced with pity and sorrow.

Chapter 08

Sufficient Evidence

Xiang Shaolong rushed back to the Command Centre and caught Jing Jun and Teng Yi in a secret discussion. Jing Jun has just come in from the farm. Teng Yi has a serious look on his face. Witnessing his entry, he called out: "Third Brother, please listen to Little Jun's report!"

Xiang Shaolong had the impression that Jing Jun slipped out to accompany his pretty village girl but is actually hard at work. Pleased, he remarked: "Let's see what his observations are."

Jing Jun produced a rolled map and spread it open on the table. Although the map is slightly worn, you can catch a bird's eye view of the Qi Army formation, the surrounding forests and hills.

Teng Yi scrutinised the map shortly and praised: "Dan Chu lives up to his reputation of being Qi's famed general. Tall mountains covered his back and his camps lined up on two high grounds. From this, you can tell that he has substance." Pointing to the central camp, he added: "A source of water is crucial to a good campsite. They are camped near the water source..." Moving his hand down to the pastures and woods between three border camps and continued: "And they have grass to feed the warhorses. If they lay appropriate formations in the woods, it will be hard-pressed to attack them even with a much larger force. There are multiple rock formations within the camp and can be used for both attack and defence. Dan Chu is more than

meets the eye. We must never let down our guard on them.”

Xiang Shaolong inquired: “Did we discover any tunnelling?”

Jing Jun proudly reported: “Negative. I did question the neighbouring huntsmen. They told me the mountain behind the camp is named Back-Wind Mountain. It nicely blocks off the cold wind blowing from the north. Just beyond the camp, there is a natural cave that goes deep into the mountain. The exit is a secret hole at the mountain side. After my investigations, I detected Qi sentries at the exit. It is no wonder that the nearby Zhao soldiers have no idea about this.”

Teng Yi pointed to a dense forest beside the mountain and checked: “Is it here? Have you entered the forest to see for yourself?”

Jing Jun answered: “It is right there. The forest runs for ten over miles straight to a point five miles north-west of Handan City. For those who are unaware of the cave, people can arrive at the city border without your detection.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up: “Come! Let’s observe from the city wall. This beats talking over a piece of paper.”

As the trio ascended the north tower sentry, city guards paid their respects. Chen Shi, the major in charge rushed over to accept his orders.

Xiang Shaolong acted uninterested and scanned the surroundings once. He made an excuse and got Chen Shi to leave. Lowering his voice, he told the

two: “It will be too risky if the Qi army is relying on internal traitors to open the City gates. The majority of the City guards are loyal men and the Qi army will be at a disadvantage if they queue up to enter the city. While the ten thousand of them is wasting time coming in, the border guards and the city guards can attack them on both sides. I believe that the Qi army has a secret way of entering the city. As long as they secure a few strategic locations and attack the palace, Handan City will belong to Tian Dan.”

Teng Yi is moved: “Third Brother speaks with reason. If they come in head to head, it will earn the spite of Handan’s army and population. Everyone will sacrifice their lives to defend the city. The Qi army of ten thousand soldiers is insufficient to deal with such a situation.”

Jing Jun imagined: “If I am Tian Dan, I will disguise my men as Zhao citizens. When they enter the city, I will dress them as palace guards. Collaborating with Zhao Mu, I will spread the rumour that Guo Kai and Cheng Xu rebelled. Zhao Mu and Empress Jing will rise to take over the court affairs. By then, Xiaocheng is dead and Third Brother is his subordinate. Other officials can only accept this takeover obediently.”

Teng Yi became even more agitated.

Xiang Shaolong watched the dense forests beyond the city and plainly said: “Tian Dan will not be so foolish to help Zhao Mu and Empress Jing fulfil their fantasy. In addition, he will not trust this Dong Horse Fanatic or the Crown Prince. Caught off-guard, the border guards may not be able to return in time. Thus, he will control the entire situation. When the army is in chaos and Handan’s troops are mostly the old, weak or handicapped, there will not be a

strong resistance.”

Teng Yi frowned: “On what grounds can he prolong his control over Handan City? Will Li Mu let him off?”

Xiang Shaolong revealed his guess about Prince Wu Chen. He continued: “It will fall to Prince Wu’s responsibility. All he needs to do is to lead his men and the Qi army masquerading as Zhao army. He can kill Zhao Mu with a good reason and even push the death of Empress Jing and Crown Prince to him. When Li Mu is back, Prince Wu Chen is sitting on the throne with the backing of Qi and Chu. What can Li Mu do? If there is an internal strife, Tian Dan the conqueror will lead his huge army to attack Handan City. When that occurs, Lian Po is busy fighting Yan and Li Mu is fighting alone. Eliminating Zhao will be a piece of cake and Tian Dan will realise his ambition.”

The sun setting the west sends out millions of rays across the wide grasslands and forests.

Teng Yi heaved a deep breath: “It is good that we have figured out the intricacies or we might be annihilated. Even when we are in hell, we have no idea what brought us there.” Pointing to a building in the city, he proposed: “That is the North Command Centre under the command of Zhao Ming Xiong. If I am not mistaken, there might be a tunnel which leads outside the city, Why don’t Little Jun conduct some investigations on the tunnel’s entrance and exit?” To Xiang Shaolong, he enquired: “How you gotten the complete army seal?”

Xiang Shaolong patted his waist pouch happily: “Both the seal and decree are

here! Let us deploy our troops now and fight to the last with Tian Dan and Zhao Mu. They may even act tonight!”

Teng Yi shook his head: “I can foresee that they are still working on the tunnel day and night. They must keep their silence when digging or they may leak out their activities. Otherwise, they need not drag for another day. The earlier they control Handan City, the better can they prepare for Li Mu’s return. When we can predict the day they complete the tunnel, we can predict the time when they will attack.”

Jing Jun suddenly warned: “Careful! Someone is here!”

Zhao Ming Xiong’s voice drifted over the stone steps of the city wall behind them: “Assistant General pays his respects to City Commander. May I ask what instructions does City Commander have?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “The King has given me the complete army seal. With such a heavy responsibility, I have to patrol personally and give my orders.”

Xiang Shaolong passed the burden of handling Zhao Ming Xiong to Teng Yi. Chatting for a few more seconds, he left with Jing Jun.

Leaving the city wall, Jing Jun made use of the darkness to conduct his investigations. He himself rushed to Han Chuang’s residence to liaise with Empress Jing.

Both parties are racing for time. Whoever can set their traps earlier will be the winner.

This time round, Han Chuang did not bring him into the inner chamber but through the garden. They passed the rice granary where Prince Xinling's men used to be hiding and reached a hut that is used to store gardening tools.

Han Chuang gave him a mysterious smile. Clapping his shoulder, he promised: "General Dong will understand everything once he enters."

As the wooden door was dragged open against the floor, Xiang Shaolong could see that the interior was dimly lit and the shadows are unclear.

Empress Jing is actually inside. Surrounding her on all fours are her personal guards as well as Han Chuang's personal escorts.

Under the light, there is a man who is tied to the wall. He appears to be in a daze and his clothes are bloodied and his face and head are full of scars. His body has burn marks which show that he has just been tortured.

Empress Jing did not even turn her head and coldly said: "Except for Marquis and General Dong, the rest of you can scram."

Everyone left in an instance.

Empress Jing simply asked: "General Dong, do you know who he is?"

Xiang Shaolong advanced to her side. Shaking his head, he answered: "Who is he?"

Behind him, Han Chuang cut in: "He is one of the family warriors of Prince

Wu Chen. He came to Handan City the day before yesterday. He came here to deliver weapon-grade copper to Guo Zhong.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by a wave of realization. He suppressed his pity and asked in a deep voice: “Has he revealed anything?” His heart could not stop thumping. If this guy refuses to say anything, it is the same as not catching him.

Empress Jing let slips: “General Dong is right. Prince Wu Chen the idiot does not know what is good for him. He has conspired with Tian Dan to revolt.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed with relief and thanked his lucky stars. Han Chuang started: “In the beginning, he is tight-lipped. We called his bluff that Prince Wu Chen was sighted in the Qi army camp that he starts to reveal everything.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling relieved when he became anxious again. He frowned: “Wouldn’t this put them on the alert? He must people who are helping him.” Empress Jing’s voice softened as she turned around and look at him. With her eyes full of gratitude, she said: “Relax. We will put on an act that he chickened out and dare not participate in the rebellion and has escaped in secret. Dong Kuang! What should I do next?”

Han Chuang suggested: “Sister and General Dong can return to the inner hall first. Leave this man to me.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is going to kill him to shut his mouth. Sighing, he escorted Empress Jing into the inner hall.

Arriving at the room where they last met; the personal guards stayed outside and even closed the door.

Empress Jing's expression is cold like ice. She stood like a statue in the centre of the room. Xiang Shaolong snaked to her back and stuck his body onto hers. He reached out with his strong hand and held onto her abdomen tightly.

Empress Jing sighed and her icy demeanour begin to thaw. She leaned into his embrace and faintly asked: "Dong Kuang! Will you deceive me?"

Xiang Shaolong can understand her position. Her two lovers, Prince Xinling and Zhao Mu, have both deceived her, causing her to lose confidence in herself.

Zhao Mu is actually ignorant about Prince Wu Chen. Under such circumstances, how could Empress Jing tell the difference? She could only believe Xiang Shaolong's lie.

Empress Jing displayed her weak feminine side and cooed: "Kiss me!"

Xiang Shaolong will not be shy about such matters. After a hot kiss, Empress Jing resumed her usual resolute self and withdrew from his embrace. Pulling him to sit down at a corner, she asked in a deep voice: "How do they plan to deal with us Mother and Son? Should we report this to His Majesty?"

After a short thinking session, Xiang Shaolong managed to arrange all the complicated issues into a single train of thought. He shook his head: "If you want to tell him, it should be done before the torture of Prince Wu Chen's

man. Moreover, there is no difference whether you tell him or not. If word gets to Zhao Mu, there will only be disadvantages and no benefits. The most pressing thing is to understand Tian Dan and Zhao Mu's plot. We must predict when they will act. After they make their move, we will react and wipe out the rebels in one shot."

Empress Jing lowered her head and shyly mentioned: "From your tone, you seemed to be aware of my relationship with Zhao Mu."

Xiang Shaolong reached and held onto her clothes, gently coaxing: "Do not think too much. Empress Jing must act like everything is normal and continue to work with Zhao Mu. Leave the other problems to me."

Empress Jing was worried: "Are you confident of handling Tian Dan? I have yet to see a man more devious than him. If I am Tian Dan, you will be the one I wish to kill first."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Now, I can feel your true concern for me."

Empress Jing's face reddened slightly. Shooting him a look, she stood up saying: "I will contact you via Ji Guang. He is not linked to Zhao Mu or Guo Kai and pledges his loyalty to the Crown Prince. He is definitely reliable."

Xiang Shaolong knew that she cannot stay for too long and he himself needed a break too. He advised: "I'll make a move first. If Zhao Mu has any news, no matter how insignificant it is, please drop me a note."

Empress Jing threw herself into his arms and softly asked: "Do you want to

check out the loyalty letter name list? I may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse. After all, I am from the royal family and Zhao Mu will not dare to offend me.”

Xiang Shaolong gave her a light hug and kiss: “Then I will have more confidence. Do you trust me?”

Empress Jing nodded her head.

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong left. Having her on his side is truly a deciding factor in this battle.

Before he could return to the Command Centre, he was detained by Pu Bu. With him are ten over warriors of the Marquis’s residence. They only winked at each other before he went on to meet Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that Tian Dan and Zhao Mu will act within these few days. As a result, he is also busy arranging his countermeasures. He is unsure of Zhao Mu’s confidence in himself. Scanning around, he did notice Yan Ping’s followers within the residence. They are easily identified as they all dress in hemp clothing and are bare-footed.

If he had not be promoted to become the City Commander, or become the confidante of Xiaocheng, or Empress Jing’s lover, based on his own abilities, he will hardly be Zhao Mu’s match. He can only thank his good fortune.

Zhao Mu personally came to meet him and led him into the secret chamber. He is cheerful and full of colour. He congratulated: “Xiaocheng has issued an

imperial decree that he has given the other half of the army seal to you. You have complete authority over the army now and you are tasked to improve the city defences.”

Xiang Shaolong modestly said: “It is due to Marquis’s good fortune that I do not lead a disgraceful life.”

Zhao Mu ordered: “We mustn’t delay. Li Mu will arrive in a few days. We must achieve control first or we will lose this golden opportunity.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “As you instruct.”

The corner of Zhao Mu’s mouth curled in a cold smile as he simply said: “Guo Kai and Cheng Xu have been scrutinizing your every move in secret, hoping to find a weak spot ...”

Xiang Shaolong purposely state: “Why not I deal with them. I will make it a clean job with no witnesses.”

Zhao Mu disagreed; “I have more important duties for you. I still have misgivings about Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong was aghast: “Marquis is not thinking of opening the city gates for the Qi army to assist the rebellion?!”

Zhao Mu clarified: “Once the rebellion is over, Tian Dan wants me to cede Wu Chen, Guan Jin, Wu Sui, Wu Heng, Chu Zhou and Fu Liu to him. These are our six provinces east of the river. How can these terms be accepted?”

Therefore, I have decided to act alone. With your input, I can still succeed without Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong could not tell if he is lying or telling the truth. He frowned: “After discounting the old, weak and handicapped soldiers, there are only about ten thousand soldiers in the City guards. Not everyone is willing to rebel with us. How can we handle Cheng Xu’s palace guards?”

Zhao Mu ordered: “There are many ways to kill Xiaocheng. You can leave this to me. I want you to use your new authority to focus your troops on the movements of the Qi army. I do not trust anyone else. Long Shan (Teng Yi) and yourself must see to this personally.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed in secret. He figured out that Zhao Mu is still suspicious of him and is only making use of him for the time being. He nodded: “I will follow your orders. If I leave the city, it may arouse suspicions. Who will the City Guards depend on for their orders?”

Zhao Mu laughed: “I have the perfect excuse. I will get a fake Xiang Shaolong to make an appearance nearby. You will have the best excuse to leave and pursue him. It is only for one night. By morning, Xiaocheng will be in heaven.”

He continued: “Regarding the city guards, you can hand them over to Zhao Ming Xiong. He is with Zhao Ya and Li Mu and is friendly with Guo Kai and Cheng Xu. With the both of you away, he will naturally take over your duties. No one will be suspect anything”

Xiang Shaolong admires his handiwork. If he did not know that Zhao Ming

Xiong is a traitor or that the Qi army is digging a tunnel, he may really fall into Zhao Mu's trap.

From all this, Zhao Mu must have been uneasy about himself. It could also be due to his character that arouses misgivings. This traitor is only using him all the time.

Zhao Mu lowered his voice and sniggered: "If something happens to Xiaocheng and you are not around, you will not be suspected of having a part to play in his death."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "You are confident of controlling Empress Jing?"

Zhao Mu nodded in appreciation: "Your thinking is very thorough. For her own sake, Empress Jing must cooperate with me. She will personally poison Xiaocheng while I kill Guo Kai and Cheng Xu. We will replace them with our own men and no one will dare to go against us."

The sound of knocking was heard.

Zhao Mu was annoyed: "Who dares to disturb me at such an hour!"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "It must something urgent." And went to open the door.

An attendant frantically came to Zhao Mu's side and whispered a few words. The traitor was taken by surprise and stood up commanding: "Follow my instructions to the letter. General Dong, please return first!"

As Xiang Shaolong left the Marquis's residence, he is very puzzled. What is the event that could cause Zhao Mu to react personally and immediately?

Chapter 09

Eloquence

Upon his arrival at the Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong's stomach is rumbling. He recollected that he hasn't had any dinner yet. He notified Teng Yi to get someone to cook a meal for him.

Instead, Teng Yi pulled him back to the main gate advising: "Third Brother, please suffer in hunger for a while longer. Your wives have sent word on more than one occasion for you to go home for dinner. From now till tomorrow night, you better be careful of what you put in your mouth. If you died from Zhao Mu's poison, it will be a great injustice! I have got men to monitor our food and drink and place some fish in the well to test if the water is pure. It is better to be safe than sorry."

Xiang Shaolong was astounded by his advice and nodded in agreement. He took the opportunity to ask: "Any news from Little Jun?"

Teng Yi praised: "There is no better spy than him. Within four hours, he has located the tunnel. It runs from Zhao Ming Xiong's camp all the way to the North City Wall. It is about a hundred metres long. Both sides are ready to be used. They are now finishing the tunnel by reinforcing it with wooden panels and pillars. It should be put to use tomorrow night."

They arrived at the assembly ground and their horses were brought to them.

Riding forward, they were escorted by nearly five hundred soldiers, putting on an impressive display.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that only ten over escorts are their own elite troops while the rest are ordinary Zhao soldiers. He is uncomfortable and enquired: "Where did these men come from?"

Teng Yi smiled: "I have sent our brothers to the various strategic locations to strengthen the power of the city defences. These men are from different departments and I have avoided using those who are linked to Zhao Ming Xiong. The background checks have been carried out and they are loyal to us. Handan City is full of hidden dangers and it is better to strengthen ourselves."

Xiang Shaolong updated Teng Yi about Zhao Mu in a low voice. Teng Yi assessed: "With such precise intelligence, it will be easier to deal with Zhao Mu and Tian Dan. The challenge is how to kill Tian Dan, capture Zhao Mu and escape back to Xianyang."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Frankly, I don't think I can accomplish both of them. Tian Dan will never take part personally. Xiaocheng that muddle-headed king has cowered at the last moment, ordering me not to touch Li Yuan and Tian Dan. We need his cooperation for tomorrow's night operations. If we have the same strength as the enemy, we will be in trouble." Teng Yi nodded in agreement: "I realize your difficult position. Thank heavens we still have one night's time to go through our plans. Little Jun is monitoring their situation. If there are any changes, we can react in the shortest time. I have investigated the surroundings. The North Wall is the only entrance to the tunnel. If the

enemy is entering the city via the tunnel, only three or four thousand can enter no matter how quickly they move within those hours. If we can prevent Zhao Mu from meeting the Qi people, I have confidence of annihilating them.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If not for your input, I will be busy like hell!”

As they spoke, they eventually reached home.

Stepping into the inner hall, he saw Zhao Ya and Ji Yanran were present and are chatting with Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi.

The girls saw him entering and all eyes were fixated on him.

Zhao Zhi asked: “Where is Second Brother?”

Xiang Shaolong sat between Zhao Ya and Ji Yanran, answering: “He went off to deploy our men to defend our residence. This is to prevent wild bees and romantic butterflies from coming in to pick these beautiful flowers.”

Everyone is amused by his refreshing talk on the bees and butterflies and could not help laughing. The stress and depressing mood is gone immediately.

Xiang Shaolong looked over to Ji Yanran: “Yanran is aware?”

Ji Yanran’s jade-liked face turn cold as she promised: “If Lord Longyang is brave enough to follow me, I will kill him at once.”

Shan Rou asked: “Do you want to steal the loyalty letters again?”

Zhao Ya implored: “Have you verified Prince Wu Chen’s rebellion? Does that woman believe you?”

As the three girls grilled him incessantly, he can only update them on all the latest developments. After he finished, they were all confused by the complicated and overlapping issues.

Xiang Shaolong continued: “Ya’er must head to Daliang for sure. Lord Longyang has promised to accompany her so Yanran only needs to leave after they have set off and Lord Longyang will be unable to trail you.”

Zhao Ya giggled: “I told Yanran to rest easy. You are not the City Commander for nothing. I am sure that Lord Longyang will invite you to keep an eye on Ji Yanran and capture Xiang Shaolong on his behalf.” She bowed over in laughter.

Xiang Shaolong is bewildered: “Why are you so cheerful?”

Zhao Ya exclaimed: “You are winning the battle with Zhao Mu and Tian Dan, why shouldn’t I be happy for you! Moreover, I have a nice bodyguard going to Daliang with me!”

Xiang Shaolong faced Shan Rou in alarm while Shan Rou hurriedly pointed at her sister clarifying: “Not me! It’s Zhi Zhi!”

Zhao Mu happily explained: “Sister Ya has to go to Daliang alone so I

volunteered to keep her company.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “That’s very nice of you. Initially, I had wanted you to leave with Mister Zou”

Facing Yanran again, he asked: “Does Li Yuan have any concern regarding your return to Daliang?”

Full of disdain, Ji Yanran chided: “Who is he to hinder my way? All he can say are the same old stuff. I am sick of his ranting!”

Xiang Shaolong informed: “We rather erred on the side of caution. I will increase the defences of Ji Yanran’s residence. Yanran must instruct your men to be extra cautious. Big Brother Wu Zhuo will escort you personally. Yanran will be a beautiful soldier and slip back to Handan City. I have an important task for you!”

Ji Yanran twinkled with smiles as she teased: “What task? I am eager to know!”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “It is to join Shan Rou and myself in bed. Aiyah!”

Shan Rou had kicked him below the table.

Zhao Ya sighed: “I am so jealous.”

This is the first time Ji Yanran has been teased in front of so many people. Her face turned fire-red and her eyes shot daggers at him but she is secretly

joyful.

Shan Rou pointed at him in annoyance: “Who is sleeping with you? Hugging a pillow is better than hugging you!” She continues to giggle and her charm was overwhelming.

Teng Yi came in and reported: “The keeper of the inner palace Ji Guang is here to look for you.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. In that moment, he realised what caused Zhao Mu to react in such a frantic manner. It is Empress Jing.

In front of Ji Guang, Xiang Shaolong opened the wooden container that is sealed with wax. He retrieve a secret document that is written beautifully but is unsigned. There are over twenty names on the document and even states their official position.

The first name is naturally City Commander Dong Kuang, followed by Zhao Ming Xiong. The third name was a stunner as it is Zhao Ling, Cheng Xu’s assistant general whom Ji Guang just mentioned this morning.

Xiang Shaolong read the list in one go and passed it to Teng Yi. Looking at Ji Guang, he checked: “How is the security of the palace?”

Ji Guang replied: “Since the burglary, arson and murder by Prince Xinling’s men, the King has held onto the palace guards army seal himself. Cheng Xu is only the person who passes on the orders. Any deployment of ten men and above must go through the King. The eighteen thousand palace guards are

camped inside and outside the palace awaiting their orders to protect the palace in shifts. Defence shouldn't be a problem."

Xiang Shaolong thought that Prince Xinling has indirectly caused more problems for Zhao Mu, causing him to borrow the strength of the Qi army. He continued to ask: "What about His Majesty's personal safety?"

Ji Guang answered: "You can put your mind at ease. The King has reorganized his personal escorts. Most of them are the family warriors of the royal family and there is no doubt about their loyalty. Some areas of the palace have been restricted to a kill-zone. Whoever that intrudes will be killed without questions asked. His food and drink is also protected. The kitchen well is heavily guarded at all times."

Ji Guang stared at the name list and state: "Empress Jing has ordered that this name list must be destroyed before our very eyes. Not a single shred must be left behind."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised Empress Jing's thorough thinking. He gave the list a second look before throwing it into the fireplace and burning it.

As Ji Guang saw the name list burning, he sincerely offered: "I am aware of the dangerous period we are going through. If you have any duties that require my help, I am willing to do my best."

Xiang Shaolong glanced over to Teng Yi. Teng Yi caught his meaning and nodded: "I can manage the City guards. Regarding the palace guards, we have to bother General Dong to speak to the King personally."

Xiang Shaolong stood up and smiled at Ji Guang: “Of course we will need your assistance as the keeper of the inner palace. Let us enter the palace and seek an audience with the King. We can chat more on the road!”

Xiaocheng got word that Xiang Shaolong is coming and hurriedly receive him in the hall behind the sleeping chambers. He anxiously asked: “Do you bring good news?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “It is not only good news, it is the best news. I have full confidence in routing all the traitors.”

Xiaocheng happily cried: “Have you stolen the loyalty letters?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “The King has great foresight. If I can bring the loyalty letters here, Zhao Mu will know that the secret has been leaked.”

Xiaocheng is in high spirits and did not take offence. He laughed: “I am so happy I forgot.” He then frowned: “Didn’t you mentioned that his security is very tight and that there is no way to burgle his residence? How did you get hold of the loyalty letters?”

Xiang Shaolong has a story ready. He explained how he used the waterway to enter the Marquis residence. He added: “I manage to contact some people in Zhao Mu’s residence who are loyal to His Majesty. They told me Zhao Mu is always hanging around this particular room so I guessed that is where the loyalty letters have been hidden. Blessed by His Majesty’s good fortune, I found the loyalty letters. After reading most of them, I was interrupted by the patrols and have to leave.”

Xiaocheng frowned: “What hasn’t this traitor made his move?”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing to himself. If he had acted earlier, he will not be tricked by me. He officially stated: “Zhao Mu is well-prepared right now. If we grab him just like that, there will be serious injuries and deaths on both sides. The best strategy is to wait for him to strike. When he begins his rebellion, we will ambush him and minimise our losses.” Xiaocheng considered his statement and nodded: “What General said is reasonable. And who are the traitors?”

Xiang Shaolong retrieve a name list from his bosom. It is a duplicate list that was written by Teng Yi before he left. He kneeled down and present it to Xiaocheng. Xiaocheng anxiously opened the list for a look and his face colour changed immediately. “What?” he groaned: “Zhao Ming Xiong is also with Zhao Mu? He is one of my potential candidates for City Commander. Is General Dong mistaken?”

Xiang Shaolong confidently said: “I am similarly concerned that the name list is a fake to throw us off the trail. Thus, I rummaged his most prized possessions to be sure. In the process, I discovered that he has dug a tunnel underneath the north command centre which leads outside the north city wall. This matter can be verified. His Majesty can send your men to follow my men to the perimeters of the tunnel. Inserting copper pipes into the ground, one can hear the sounds coming from the tunnel. Please issue the order now.”

Xiaocheng eyed him with suspicion before speaking: “It is not that I do not trust you. This matter is of great complications. If you can prove your words, I

will be relieved. This matter must be executed with utmost care and not alert our enemies.”

Finishing, he waved two of his personal escorts over. Xiang Shaolong led them outside the palace and got a waiting Wu Guo to bring them to the tunnel grounds.

When he came back, Xiaocheng has finished reading the name list and was letting out a long sigh: “This name list should be correct. Except for Zhao Ming Xiong and Zhao Ling, the rest of them are people that I have already suspected to have links to Zhao Mu. General Dong has accomplished a noteworthy mission. I will keep this in mind.”

His ferocious eyes glittered as he commanded: “The tunnel is definitely dug for the sake of the Qi army. General Dong, please seal it at once. Next, in the fastest and most quiet fashion, round up all the traitors and lay siege to the Marquis Residence. When Li Mu is back, he shall lead the attack on Zhao Mu and everything will come to an end.”

Xiang Shaolong could guess this coming from Xiaocheng. He lowered his voice: “Your Majesty, there is another important news. To gain my trust, Zhao Mu has revealed to me that he is conspiring to Prince Wu Chen. Right now, Prince Wu Chen is at the Qi army camps.”

Xiaocheng’s countenance changed: “What?!”

Xiang Shaolong continued: “Now I realise why Zhao Mu wants to rebel, as soon as he.... Hei! That Prince Wu Chen will be able to succeed the throne

and the state of Qi will gain our Zhao territories east of the river.”

Xiaocheng impatiently interrupted him: “I understand. What brilliant counter measure do you have?”

Using his most solid and confident tone, Xiang Shaolong proposed: “If we acted first against the rebels, it is hard to determine victory. The biggest problem is we cannot attack them at this point in time. If someone opens the City gates for the Qi army, we can still win but it will be at the expense of the citizens. We have to protect the palace and lay siege to the Marquis Residence at the same time. It will be difficult to fight on so many fronts and is unfavourable to us. If we allow the Qi army to come in from the tunnel instead, I have a brilliant trap waiting for them.”

He added in a deep voice: “While Tian Dan is in the palace, we should kill him once and for all!”

Xiaocheng slowly said: “This news came too late. Tian Dan made an excuse to inspect his camp and has left Handan City in the evening.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “How come I have no idea at all?”

Xiaocheng bitterly laughed: “He left by the North Gate and Zhao Ming Xiong naturally will not inform you!”

Suddenly, the two spies of Xiaocheng came back and present their findings to him.

Xiaocheng is even more trusting of Xiang Shaolong. After another hour of discussion did he finally leave the palace.

As he stepped out of the palace, he knows that the key to victory is in his hands. No matter how formidable Tian Dan, Zhao Mu or Li Yuan are, they cannot escape from his grasp.

Chapter 10

Detailed Arrangements

Back at the Command Centre, Teng Yi was nowhere to be found. Instead, Lord Longyang was waiting for him. Both of them are on good terms already so there was no need for the usual courtesies. After dispensing his men, Lord Longyang commented: "I am relieved that my King has sent an army of five thousand soldiers, led by my good friend General Wei Bai Nian. They will arrive at Fan Wu tonight at meet up with us tomorrow. We will no longer be afraid of Tian Dan or Li Yuan's mischief."

Xiang Shaolong began: "I have a favour to ask of Lord."

Lord Longyang happily agreed: "Brother Dong please speak your mind. I will do my best to help you."

Xiang Shaolong requested: "Please take good care of Lady Ya and make sure she can return safely."

Lord Longyang was taken aback and cried: "Brother Dong, you are really in love with her!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: "I am not sure too but after a night of passion, she promised to be loyal to me. Thus, I do not want her to come to any harm."

Lord Longyang was incensed as he shot an eye at him before faintly sighing with helplessness: “Rest assured Brother Dong! Because you asked, I will guarantee her safety and well-being.”

He continues to sigh: “How is Brother Dong going to handle Tian Dan, Li Yuan and Zhao Mu?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Men can plan but Heaven can interfere. I will do my best.”

Lord Longyang frowned deeply and unhappily said: “I know I cannot persuade General to abandon Handan City. However, do not forget my invitation. If you can succeed, please escape to Wei. I will inform the border guards to receive you.”

Xiang Shaolong is moved and gave his thanks.

This beautiful man changed topic: “Does Brother Dong wants to score a big merit? From my calculations, Talented Lady Ji is pretending to return to Wei. In reality, she is rendezvousing with Xiang Shaolong. I cannot even protect myself and have to escort Lady Ya back to Daliang. So I simply cannot afford any energy or time to keep my eye on her.”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave and checked: “Does Lord know this man called Yan Ping?”

Lord Longyang exclaimed: “You must be talking about Mohist Juzi Yan Ping! Not only do I know him, we are well-acquainted. This man is good at military

warfare and is a rare talent. Too bad he is too arrogant and difficult to get along with.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong can sense that Lord Longyang has sought to recruit Yan Ping as well. This shows that Wei do harbour ambitions against Zhao. He smiled: “Why don’t you tell Yan Ping about Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran. This man hates Xiang Shaolong deeply and will pursue him at all costs. I can also focus on my original work.”

Lord Longyang smiled: “Not only can you can focus on your work, this will lower Zhao Mu’s prowess at the same time!”

Exposed by him, Xiang Shaolong awkwardly laughed: “It is really hard to hide anything from you!”

Lord Longyang cheerfully said: “I’ll see to it and even exaggerated my words to lend you this helping hand. Ai! After this separation, I wonder if I’ll ever see you again.”

Xiang Shaolong gracefully mentioned: “Nobody will know what will happen tomorrow. Life is only a few decades long. As long as we have shared a life and death experience together, who cares about what the future holds.”

Delighted, Lord Longyang stood up grinning: “Brother Dong is one in a million and so is your thinking.”

Xiang Shaolong personally sent him to the door. As he is turning back, Zhao Ba had come to see him.

After a few words of courtesy, Zhao Ba revealed: “The King has ordered me to see you and do whatever I can to help.”

Xiang Shaolong is glad that Xiaocheng is doing his best to cooperate with him and execute his plan. After some talks, he praised Zhao Ba to the skies. While Zhao Ba is feeling high and mighty, he warned: “Our conversation must remain top secret! Headmaster must not let a third party know, especially Guo Zhong. Headmaster should understand his connection to Li Yuan!”

Zhao Ba vehemently cursed: “Old Guo is getting muddle-headed, desiring to be the father-in-law of that cold blooded thief Li Yuan. I am so pissed that I haven’t seen him for a while. General can put your mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong start off: “Today, we require Headmaster’s help as Zhao Mu has secretly conspired with Tian Dan and Li Yuan against our King.”

Zhao Ba’s face changed colour as he uttered: “What! Tian Dan and Li Yuan are so daring!?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “The King has forbid me to give you all the details. Can I enquire as to how many top fighters do you have at the Martial School and whose loyalty is beyond question?”

Zhao Ba puffed his chest: “At least five or six hundred elite fighters. Are we attacking the Marquis Residence?”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “It depends. Can headmaster find an excuse like an (army field) exercise? Using this cover, secretly assemble your men at

Lady Ya's residence. Once you enter, prevent anyone from leaving so that your location will not be leaked out."

Zhao Ba is a man who loves fighting and action. He happily consented and left after further discussion.

It is almost midnight. Just as Xiang Shaolong was deciding to go home and sleep or not, Teng Yi came back. In a relaxed mood, he updated: "Lucky we had that name list or we will be in peril. Major Gan Zhu and Major Li Ming who are guarding the South gate are Zhao Mu's spies as well. Zhao Ming Xiong has deployed them there with ulterior motives."

Xiang Shaolong remembered these two names but had no idea they were in charge of the South gate. Thinking what a close shave they had, he analyzed: "Zhao Mu is a top schemer. First, he let Tian Dan's army come in from the tunnel and create chaos. Then, he will open up both the North and South gates for the entire army to enter Handan City. Their attack is focused and well-planned. Even with the entire Zhao population attacking them, it is of little use. This is truly a top battle strategy."

Teng Yi laughed: "A pity he is not your match. Otherwise, the loyalty letters will not have appeared." Patting his shoulder, he added: "Third Brother should return first. Leave this to me. Little Jun and his men are actively spying on the Qi army. You can relax and keep your wives company."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "This upcoming battle, we will use our elite brothers exclusively for Zhao Mu. Does Second Brother have any method of assembling a force of elite City guards and plant them in strategic locations

inside the city. I want them to limit the power of the Qi forces.”

Teng Yi replied: “All thanks to your Army Seal. Earlier, I was discussing the deployment with Zhao Ming Xiong. He tried to trick me with various recommendations. I allowed myself to be tricked and accept all his suggestions. Now that he has deployed all those loyal to him at the north and south gate, I am free to choose my elite city guards from the remaining forces. In fact, I have assembled an elite force of two thousand city guards. The rest of the old, weak or handicapped soldiers will be sent to spy on the Qi army as Zhao Mu requested. Better to let them leave than to hamper our progress in Handan City.”

Catching each other’s eyes, they held their bellies and filled the room with laughter.

At home, Ji Yanran had led the Tian sisters away while Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi had gone back to her residence. Barely awake, Shan Rou is still waiting for his return. She roared: “Why are you back so late! I have something to say to you!”

Due to her lack of sleep, Shan Rou is slightly not in full control of herself.

Xiang Shaolong carried her with both hands into his bedroom.

Before he could step over the door ledge, Shan Rou displayed her prowess and bit him on the shoulder.

Xiang Shaolong bore with the pain and threw her onto his bed.

Shan Rou proudly giggled and flipped to one side. She comfortably lay down and closed both her eyes. She seems to be offering herself for his pleasure.

Xiang Shaolong is in need of a beauty to soothe his tense nerves. Removing his shoes, he climbed onto Shan Rou.

She is strangely cooperative and passionate, letting Xiang Shaolong enjoy her tenderness.

After the stormy affair, they hug each other to sleep.

Shan Rou whispered: "This is our last night together. In the future, you need not tolerate my tantrums."

An exhausted Xiang Shaolong was almost asleep but was fully awoken after hearing these words. He sighed: "So you are not joking and is leaving me for good."

Shan Rou sighed: "I am in a dilemma too. From what I see, Tian Dan will survive this episode..."

Xiang Shaolong butt in: "If you risk your life to assassinate him again, I will be worried."

Shan Rou intimately cooed: "I will be extra cautious and will not die in vain. If I fail, I will commit suicide. Who is afraid of death?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that her mind is made up. He gently advised: "Do not

pressure yourself too much. If you know you cannot succeed, look for me in Xianyang. Don't you wish to see Shan Lan?"

Shan Rou kissed him: "Got it, you long-winded man! Aren't you going to make love with me one more time?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "The Queen has ordered. No matter how difficult it is, your servant will oblige."

Before the sun is up, Xiang Shaolong was roused by Shan Rou. "Get up quickly! As the City Commander, how can you be so lazy?" she scolded.

Today is her 'D-Day' so she is highly excited. Under her teasing, he forced himself to get out of bed.

Shan Rou disguised as his escort and seriously state: "Today, I will break all traditions and listen to your every command obediently. However, I must be at your side all the time."

Xiang Shaolong recalled getting Lord Longyang to deceive Yan Ping. He dared not be complacent and hurriedly washed up and got dressed. In between bites, he led Wu Guo and his entourage back to the Command Centre.

It was daybreak when he arrived at the Command Centre. Teng Yi is busy like a bee but he is still as energetic and fresh. Xiang Shaolong is amazed at this Ironman.

Teng Yi noticed how serious Shan Rou looked and teased her. He then

proceeds to report to Xiang Shaolong about last night's deployment: "I have assembled three thousand men internally and externally. They will be the main force against the enemy. I have analyzed the attacking and retreating routes of the enemy and I guarantee that the ambush will be successful and we will make a killing. Zhao Ba's men are an added advantage as the enemy will never think that we will have this bonus."

Xiang Shaolong added: "At that time, Xiaocheng will transfer another five thousand elite palace guards under our command. With this, we will have over ten thousand elite troops which can mop up the rebels. Divide the remaining City guards into two groups. Group A will be responsible for guarding the city and patrolling the streets. Group B will switch from monitoring the Qi army to guarding Handan City's borders. Let Tian Dan know that we are ready and not make any reckless attacks."

Shan Rou could not help but ask: "How are we going to escape?"

Xiang Shaolong teased her: "Aren't you a simple and obedient soldier? Your general is talking and who are you to interrupt?"

Shan Rou was annoyed and pouted, staring hardly at Wu Guo who is trying to hold his laughter at the side. 'I'll get even with you later!' her body language displayed.

As relax as possible, Teng Yi held his laughter and replied: "It couldn't be easier. During the attack on Zhao Mu's residence, all of us died in the fight. Wouldn't that be a good closure?"

Shan Rou and Wu Guo were bowled over and did not know what to say.

Xiang Shaolong assessed: "Today's first task is to contact Pu Bu. Without his intelligence reports, there are many things we cannot do."

Teng Yi agreed and Xiang Shaolong continued to speak about Yan Ping.

Teng Yi joked: "He did not learn his lesson the first time round. We will annihilate him and take revenge for Mister Yuan Zong."

After a detailed discussion, Xiang Shaolong led Shan Rou to the palace to send of Lord Longyang and Zhao Ya.

Palace security is extremely tight. Ji Guang noticed them and welcomed: "The King, Empress Jing, Lord Longyang, Princess Ya, Miss Zhi and Master Guo are having breakfast. The King asked me to send you to see him immediately if you should show up."

Xiang Shaolong winked at Shan Rou and Wu Guo, asking them to wait for him outside the palace. With Ji Guang's company, he entered the palace.

In a low voice, Ji Guang warned; "General Cheng Xu knows that there is something between the King and you. He appears to be very upset. You have to be careful when you see him."

Xiang Shaolong realised that it is erroneous to neglect him and it may cause some trouble.

Although this kid is snobbish, he is not evil. As he thought about it, Cheng Xu appeared at the end of a long corridor under the escort of some palace guards.

Ji Guang gave a dry cough and stop speaking.

Xiang Shaolong waved to Cheng Xu from afar and Cheng Xu reluctantly returned the gesture. When they are nearly facing each other, Xiang Shaolong winked at Ji Guang before approaching the uncertain Cheng Xu: “General Cheng, can I have a private word with you?”

Cheng Xu anxiously nodded in consent and they left the corridor and entered the garden.

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice: “The traitors are rebelling. What plans does General Cheng have?”

Cheng Xu coldly retorted: “General Dong is handling this well. What do I have to worry about?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “General Cheng is too serious. I have a suggestion. If we work together and resolve this danger, it will only be beneficial to both of us either personally or officially. What does General Cheng think?”

Cheng Xu appears to be tempted but after a reality check, he bitterly laughed: “Although I am the leader of the palace guards, I have no real authority. Everything has to be agreed by the King. I think General Dong had better speak directly to the King instead.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “The King cannot wear his armour and fight the war personally. In the end, General Cheng is still required to manage the palace guards. Let me speak to the King first and discuss with you again.”

He added after a sigh: “I, Dong Horse Fanatic, is not used to an official position. After this episode, I will quit my post as City Commander and focus on horse-breeding. If General Cheng can score some merit later, you will be the new City Commander.”

He stretched his hand towards a disbelieving Cheng Xu: “If I do not honour my words, may I die a horrible death and bring shame to my ancestors.”

Recalling the days when they went through thick and thin, his eyes became shining with sincerity.

(Note: Cheng Xu is with Xiang Shaolong on his trip to Daliang to steal the Lu Gong Secret Manual)

Cheng Xu was moved and reached out with a great force, grabbing Xiang Shaolong’s hand tightly. He embarrassedly confessed: “General Dong is more generous than I can imagine, I...”

Xiang Shaolong held his hand for a while before letting go. Patting his shoulder, he returned to Ji Guang and waved with confidence.

Cheng Xu continued to daze in the sun, amazed that there are such people who love animals more than power. No wonder he is called Horse Fanatic.

Reaching the inner palace, breakfast is over. Xiaocheng and Empress Jing are accompanying Lord Longyang towards a large group of men on horseback.

Xiang Shaolong caught up to them. Zhao Ya, Zhao Zhi and Empress Jing stared at him with different expressions.

Empress Jing is full of love and warmth while the two other ladies are full of sadness at the thought of separation.

Xiang Shaolong knew that it is not a good time to talk in confidence. He appeared in front of Xiaocheng and Longyang, bowing deeply and bade farewell to Lord Longyang.

The sadness in Lord Longyang's is not lesser than the two girls. Standing beside Xiaocheng, Guo Kai sniggered: "If General Dong visits Daliang, he will be Lord's most esteemed guest."

Xiaocheng appears to be ignorant about their relationship and look over to Xiang Shaolong when he heard this.

Although he knows that he will not see Xiaocheng after tonight, Xiang Shaolong still feels uneasy under his stares.

After some fanfare, everyone board their carriages. His old friend, Zha Yuan, has been promoted to a captain of the palace guards. Leading five hundred palace guards, he is tasked to protect the convoy. When they leave the city, Xiang Shaolong will assign another group of city guards to protect them till they arrive in Wei. Halfway, they will meet up with the Wei army. As a result,

safety shouldn't be an issue. Tian Dan and company will not stir up trouble and attack Lord Longyang at such a critical juncture.

While boarding, Lord Longyang chance upon a short moment of privacy and informed Xiang Shaolong: "Yan Ping has been tricked. When I told him that Talented Lady Ji refused to travel together, he left at once."

Xiang Shaolong dare not reply and bade his farewell to the two ladies. When he was about to leave, Xiaocheng summoned him into the library and Guo Kai was left out in the cold.

After the attendants have left, Xiaocheng revealed; "Prince Wu Chen is really rebelling. I brought in Lady Li for questioning and she confessed that Prince Wu Chen came to Handan secretly a month ago. After a few days, he left. He must have been liaising with his spies."

Xiang Shaolong has no idea who is Lady Li and guessed that she must be from the royal family. Because of her close ties with Prince Wu Chen, she was embroiled in the scandal.

Xiang Shaolong is glad that Xiaocheng has personally verified this matter. He remembered his promise to Cheng Xu and added: "Presently, spies will be watching every move you make. If there are any slips, they will be alerted at once. Due to these circumstances, General Cheng Xu becomes valuable as he is not under observation. If you can secretly bestow some military authority to him and get him to work closely with me, we can destroy the enemies' plot together."

Xiaocheng was surprised: “Are you sure he will not mess things up?”

Xiang Shaolong reassured: “At least he is not connected to Zhao Mu or else Zhao Mu will not get me to harm him. Zhao Mu wants Cheng Xu out of the way so that Zhao Ling can take over his position. Put your mind at ease, my King! General Cheng is a talented man. His last mistake is not made on the battlefield. Who knows, it may even be Zhao Mu who leaked the secret of the palace tunnels to Prince Xinling’s men so that you will remove Cheng Xu from his post.”

Xiaocheng pondered and agreed that it makes perfect sense. Summoning Cheng Xu, he gave him fresh instructions and ordered him to work closely with Xiang Shaolong. If they succeed, huge rewards await them.

Cheng Xu was moved to tears. The three of them had a detailed meeting regarding tonight’s counterattack after which Xiang Shaolong galloped non-stop to Liu Residence where Ji Yanran is staying.

Chapter 11

Attacking and Defending At the Same Time

Even before he could reach the Liu Residence, Xiang Shaolong and his men had a big surprise! Horse carriages were promptly lined up in front of the residence blockading the entire street. Any empty spaces were filled with Ji Yanran's well-wishers and common folks who there to witness the spectacle.

Upon his sighting, everyone began pointing at him and cheering: "That is Dong Horse Fanatic!" while others shouted: "That is a true hero."

Xiang Shaolong can only laugh bitterly and got down from his horse with the rest of his men. Shan Rou laid down her conditions first: "I am not waiting for you outside no matter what you say."

Xiang Shaolong cannot win her in an argument. Instructing Wu Guo to maintain order in the streets, he squeezed into residence with Shan Rou.

The servants of Liu Residence have been informed of his arrival. They welcomed Xiang Shaolong and led him into the inner chambers. The waiting Tian sisters saw him and their eyes shone with happiness. Leaping into his bosom, they wailed in tears.

As Xiang Shaolong was busy pacifying the two girls, like a magician, Ji Yanran managed to evade all the attention and slipped in. She angrily cursed: "I am bored to death!" Scrutinizing the escort soldier next to the three of them, she

recognized Shan Rou.

Embarrassed. The Tian sisters left Xiang Shaolong's bosom with their eyes swollen with all the crying.

Shan Rou showed the gentle side of her, pulling the Tian sisters to a corner and continued to pacify them.

Xiang Shaolong joked: "How did you slip away?"

An annoyed Ji Yanran responded: "I got godfather (Zou Yan) to handle them. I am not interested in such activities."

She added in a low voice: "Han Chuang just notified me that Li Yuan is leading five hundred of his family warriors to escort me back to Wei. They are waiting for me outside the city wall. What should we do?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: "Relax! He is simply using this as an excuse to leave Handan to avoid any connections with tonight's event. After tonight, he will come back to check on the end result." He went on to share about Yan Ping.

An attendant came to report that it is time to set off.

Ji Yanran got her men to send the Tian sisters secretly into one of the horse carriage. Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo and hundreds of city guards were leading and protecting the convoy as they rode towards the east gate.

Before noon, the entourage has left the city and proceed east towards the State of Han. The number of city guards has been boosted to over a thousand.

Xiang Shaolong instructed Wu Guo on how to deal with Li Yuan before hiding with Shan Rou in the same carriage as the Tian sisters. Together, they travelled with Ji Yanran.

After travelling for half a mile, Li Yuan and his five hundred family warriors rushed over from the west gate where they had been waiting.

Ji Yanran commanded the entourage to stop. When Li Yuan reached her carriage side, she asked with discontent: "Why is Imperial Uncle chasing me?"

Li Yuan jumped down from his horse and went to her carriage window asking: "There are many bandits on these roads and Li Yuan cannot help but be worried for Miss. Therefore, I wish to personally send you to Wei. Ai! Aren't you going back to Wei? You seemed to be travelling in the wrong direction!"

Behind Ji Yanran's carriage, Xiang Shaolong peeped out from his carriage. Li Yuan has an incensed look on his face and must be thinking that Yanran is deceiving him.

Ji Yanran's sweet and gentle voice sounded from within the carriage: "Imperial Uncle is mistaken. Yanran is sending Mister Zou back to Han before going home to Wei. Imperial Uncle, please do not send us any further. Yanran

is capable of taking care of herself.”

Li Yuan coldly smiled: “Is Miss Ji really going home to Daliang?”

Ji Yanran’s voice turned cold and she hissed: “None of your business. Men!”

Wu Guo gave a loud reply and rode over to her carriage.

Ji Yanran calmly ordered: “Kill whoever that follows us!”

Li Yuan was ashen faced, exclaiming: “Miss!”

Wu Guo shouted his command and gestured with his hands. The carriage convoy continued to move forward while he led his men and detained Li Yuan with the family warriors.

Mad with anger, Li Yuan flew up his horse and swore: “Even if your King sees me, he has to show me some courtesy and respect. Who dares to block my way?!”

Wu Guo cannot be bothered with his antics and icily challenged: “Feel free to try your luck. But if you continue to follow us, do not blame my weapon for being merciless.”

Li Yuan is so incensed that his face is turning red. He could see that Wu Guo is very determined and his army is twice as big as his own. He has no confidence of winning. After Ji Yanran and the carriages have gone far, Wu Guo yelled a new command and chased the entourage with his army, leaving

Li Yuan and his men dazed at the same spot, watching the dust kicked up by the galloping horses.

Out of a sudden, Li Yuan knew that he has lost this top beauty forever.

Initially, there are grasslands on the two sides of the official road to Han. After an hour on the road, the grasslands are replaced by forests. Hugging the Tian sisters, Xiang Shaolong coaxed: “Be obedient and listen to Mister Zou on the road. Very soon, both of you will be back at Xianyang. From then on, we can live happily together!”

The two girls held their tears and nodded in consent.

As he spoke, the horse carriages began to slow down and came to a complete stop eventually.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou got out of their carriage. Under Wu Guo’s cover, Ji Yanran is now disguised as an escort soldier and got out of her carriage as well.

Xiang Shaolong went over to Zou Yan’s side and wished: “Mister, please take care.”

Opening the curtains, Zou Yan laughed: “There is nothing under the sky that cannot be accomplished by you.”

The entourage started to move off again under the leadership of another elite brother. Another fifty elite brothers continue to protect the carriages

back to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong has prepared all the necessary travel documents for them. Without needing to go through Han, they can easily cross the border between Zhao and Qin. As long as they avoid the military passes, they can return to Xianyang effortlessly.

Even in the 21st century, it is easy to enter a country illegally. In this age where the land is plentiful and the population is small, it is not worth mentioning how simple it can be for people to move around.

Under Wu Guo's command, the remaining army of one thousand city guards entered the thick forest and based themselves in various strategic points.

They had barely concealed themselves when Wu Zhou appeared and reported: "Third brother's guess is correct. Yan Ping was tricked when Yanran unexpectedly exited Handan City via the east gate. They are trying the best to rush here and should be arriving soon."

Ji Yanran laughed: "In their wildest dreams, they will never imagine that they will be attacked by the Zhao army with the consent of Xiaocheng."

Shan Rou asked: "Did Li Yuan return to Handan City?"

Wu Zhuo smiled: "He left for the Qi army camp but got ten over spies to continue to follow Yanran. I have killed all of them."

Sounds of urgent hoof beats can be heard from the grasslands. Xiang

Shaolong swore in a deep voice: “We will not hold back and kill every single one of them.”

Wu Zhuo reassured: “Relax! We have one thousand men against three hundred of them. Moreover, we have the element of surprise. They have no chance of surviving. Even if anyone manages to get away, they will still be killed if they go back to Handan City.”

“They’re here!” Shan Rou signalled.

Wu Zhuo left their company and gave fresh instructions.

Everyone prepared their strong bows and their sharp arrows. Hiding in the forest, they await Yan Ping and his Mohist followers.

Ji Yanran whispered into his ears with delight: “My torment is over. From today onwards, I will fight alongside hubby and share every joy and sorrow until our deaths.”

Xiang Shaolong has gained her true love and replied with sweet words. Grateful for her love, he did not hold back and kissed her pretty face.

With the sun high above them, the landscape shone like a scene from a movie.

A huge troop of riders came into their view, stirring up clouds of dust.

When all of them entered the ambush area, a horn sounded and a thousand

arrows left their strong bows and shot out like rain towards the enemy. Men and horses alike began to tumble down and there was blood and flesh everywhere. In this first attack, over half of the enemies were felled from their horses.

After the second volley of arrows, there was nobody on horseback any more.

More than half of Yan Ping's men had been killed by now. Their forces were in a state of disarray and panic.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is best time. Pulling out Bloodwave, he charged at the enemies. Shan Rou and Ji Yanran were like two tigresses on his left and right, killing whoever that is in their way.

A peaceful forest has transformed into a slaughterhouse.

The city guards have been specially trained by Teng Yi day and night. Every Zhao citizen admires a hero. Everyone is bravely using a shield to protect themselves and viciously attacking the enemy with lances and heavy swords. Although the Mohist warriors are highly-skilled, they have lost their morale and most of them are injured. With the smaller numbers, how can they withstand their attacks?

Xiang Shaolong evaded a thrust of an enemy sword and flipped his wrist, chopping down on the attacker. He caught sight of Yan Ping under the protection of several of his followers. They were trying the best to retreat into the centre of the forest to escape from the City guards.

Energised by the thought of Yuan Zong's revenge, Xiang Shaolong signalled to the two girls and charged forward like a wild tiger, chopping down at the outermost man surrounding Yan Ping.

The man forcefully met his chop and was shaken by the strong arm strength behind Xiang Shaolong's sword. His entire arm went numb and he staggered to hold onto his sword. Shan Rou took this break to kill him with a strike of her long sword.

On the other side was Ji Yanran. Unlike her usual gentle self, Ji Yanran let out a shrill cry and advanced with her sword flashing with brilliance. Another two men were felled by her.

Xiang Shaolong broke the sword of another man and sent him off with a flying kick and turned to face Yan Ping.

Yan Ping roared: "Dong Kuang! What the hell is going on?!"

In this sentence, another three of Yan Ping's men fell down with their clothes soaked with blood, showing the intensity of the fight.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Juzi does not know what is good for him. The King has ordered me to kill you for conspiring with Zhao Mu."

Yan Ping defended himself from the two swords on his left and right. He then realised that he is the only one standing from his side. Fully surrounded on all sides, he knows that his time is up. He roared: "Dong Kuang! If you are a hero, kill me with your own sword in a duel!"

Xiang Shaolong agreed to his ploy and got his men to step back. Raising his sword, he promised: “Let me grant your death wish!” His sword flashing, he zoomed forward like a wild madman.

Yan Ping is exhausted and cannot handle his strong blows. Whenever their blades meet, he will step back to maintain his balance.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong stood completely still and his hands, Bloodwave is vibrating slightly. Everyone present can sense that he is at one with his sword and the forest is filled with his killing aura.

After all, Yan Ping is a master swordsman. Taking this chance to catch his breath, he advanced and swept over with his sword. The sharp whistling of the sword as it cuts through the air penetrates the ears of everyone.

Xiang Shaolong is aware of his swordplay and remains calm. He counter attacked with the third supreme killing skill of Mozi – Attacking and Defending at the same time.

In their last duel, Yan Ping lost out to this stroke.

It may be due to Yuan Zong’s divine intervention. When Yan Ping saw this move, he felt somewhat familiar. His spirit is shaken and he seemed to have guessed that Dong Horse Fanatic is in fact Xiang Shaolong. When he was about to call out, a white flash of Xiang Shaolong’s sword sped towards him, crushing him like a brick wall.

Yan Ping held his tongue and defended himself. Just as he barely deflected

the blow, he felt great pain in his stomach. Xiang Shaolong has taken the opportunity to kneel him in the stomach.

Yan Ping steadied himself and did not retreat. Gritting his teeth, he attacked Xiang Shaolong without any reservations.

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh and deflected the blow. Dang! A loud noise was made when the weapons clashed and rang in everyone's ears.

Making use of this opening, Bloodwave shot forward like lightning and embedded itself in Yan Ping's chest.

Yan Ping's sword fell to the ground and he is shaking uncontrollably. He cannot believe his own eyes. Buried in his chest is the enemy's sword and fresh blood is pouring out from his wound. He groaned: "You are..."

Xiang Shaolong could not afford to have him call out his real name. He replied in a low voice: "This is for Yuan Zong!"

He ferociously pulled out his long sword.

The forest is full of cheering and morale is sky high.

As Yan Ping fell down in front of him, Xiang Shaolong looked up to heaven and silently prayed: "Brother Yuan! If you can hear me, you can rest in peace now." In his heart, he is feeling ironic. He has completely uprooted the Mohist organization from Zhao. Will it really make Yuan Zong happy?

When Xiang Shaolong is back at the Command Centre, there is only an hour to sunset. Every street is peaceful and on the surface, one cannot sense the turbulent and rough undercurrents.

Everybody gathered in the quiet army study to listen to Teng Yi's latest update.

Teng Yi started with Pu Bu and has successfully communicated with him to act according to the grand plan. He added: "There are many redeployments among the city guards. I purposely messed things up but actually, only Zhao Ming Xiong's army is in a mess. Our men have already been assembled at the strategic locations. I have also purposely situated huge numbers of our soldiers outside the city. Besides myself, there is no one who knows what is going on."

Ji Yanran laughed: "With Second Brother in charge, everyone can put their mind at ease."

Teng Yi described: "When the sky is dark, we will take immediate action and capture all the rebel leaders. Using Third Brother's appearance as an excuse, we will impose a city-wide curfew so as to avoid harming any innocent citizens."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "When am I supposed to appear?"
Everyone was tickled and had a good laugh.

Teng Yi laughed: "Jing Jun has a clear picture of the North tunnel. Zhao Ming Xiong has removed all the city guards at the tunnel exit and replaced them

with his personal escort guards. He is sitting alone in the North Command Centre. Even if we killed him, cooked him and finished eating him, none of his men will have the slightest idea.”

In these ancient times, the City gates are of utmost military importance. The city gates will also house barracks, offices of military leaders and Command Centres. They are well-defended at all times. Handan City’s biggest Command Centre is situated at the East gate which is where they are based at.

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “What news does Little Jun has?”

Teng Yi answered: “After lunch, the Qi army has started to move through the cave in Back Wind Mountain and secretly entered the forest. Little Jun dare not enter the forest to spy as it is too risky. However, we can imagine that at nightfall, Zhao Ming Xiong will cover their advance. The Qi army will first cross the moat and enter Handan City through the tunnel.”

Ji Yanran joked: “If the Qi army discovered that their cover is actually our spy, how will they feel?”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “They should feel honoured!”

Wu Guo entered the room at this point, exclaiming: “The Zhao lieutenants have spotted Xiang Shaolong’s tracks!”. Everybody was initially shocked by his outburst before having a good laugh again.

Chapter 12

In Complete Control

The huge army left Handan City via the east gate. Under the glowing rays of the setting sun, the grasslands shimmered with their brilliance.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi personally led the army to investigate the sighting of Xiang Shaolong at a village fifteen miles away.

This army of five thousand city guards is just a cover. When they reached a thick forest with adequate hiding places, they will stay hidden until night time. Wu Guo will assume command and march them to the appointed spot where they will engage the Qi army who are trying to enter Handan City through the South Gate.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi slipped back into the city and resumed control of the city guards.

Hiding in the study, they receive intelligence reports from their spies.

After the sun eventually disappeared into the horizon of this ancient city, Handan City is soon filled with lights and everything is as per normal.

When Xiaocheng got word of Xiang Shaolong's sighting, he acted accordingly to the plan and commanded Zhao Ming Xiong to assume Xiang Shaolong's responsibilities at the Command Centre. Cheng Xu and the palace guards

went on to impose a city-wide curfew. Everyone knew that Xiaocheng is terrified of Xiang Shaolong and no one suspected that it is a ploy.

From this moment, Zhao Mu is cut off from the outside world. Neither Zhao Ming Xiong nor anyone could communicate with him.

Zhao Ming Xiong did not suspect foul play as he led hundreds of his personal escorts to the main Command Centre. When he stepped into the main hall, he was surprised that all of his escorts have been locked out. With a 'Bang!' the huge door was closed behind him.

Zhao Ming Xiong was alarmed and he cried: "What is going on!?"

The city guards on two sides walked towards him in one smooth movement. Lowering their lances, they held him in position.

On the other side of the door, bows were heard firing and tragic shouting can be heard.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi came out from a side door and faced him.

Zhao Ming Xiong's face is drained of any colour. He angrily yelled: "General Dong! Why are you making things difficult for me? I did not commit any wrongdoings!"

Teng Yi coldly hissed: "Does conspiring with Zhao Mu to rebel count as a wrongdoing?"

Zhao Ming Xiong's expression became more deathly white. His voice shook: "How dare you slander me!"

Adopting a sit-and-wait attitude, Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "A grand tunnel was newly constructed right under your command centre. Don't tell me you know nothing about it!"

Zhao Ming Xiong thought of his pretty wife and his lovely son at home. Both his legs turned soft and he kneeled down.

Teng Yi detested men without backbone. He called: "Tie him up!"

The city guards put their weapons aside and surged forward, tying him up.

Xiang Shaolong went up to this kneeling figure and promised: "If you will obediently cooperate with me, I will spare your life and send you and your family away from Handan City. If I speak a word of untruth, may I die a tragic death."

Zhao Ming Xiong was trembling and raised his head, disbelieving what he had just heard from this towering god-like hero.

Teng Yi cautioned: "But you must first tell us how to communicate with Zhao Mu. Once we verified your information, we will send you out from the east gate and supply you with horses, provisions and travel documents. Men! Open the door!"

As the giant door opened, Zhao Ming Xiong's entire household of over a

hundred people were herded into the hall. His immediate family and servants were all present and panic is written on their faces. Amazingly, they were all dressed in travelling attire and carrying their own luggage.

Zhao Ming Xiong is extremely touched. He gratefully thanked: "I do not know how to repay you. I am convinced to carry out all your orders."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has won the psychological battle and ordered: "Release Brother Zhao at once!"

The ropes binding Zhao Ming Xiong were severed immediately.

Zhao Ming Xiong stood up and Teng Yi smiled: "Escort Madam Zhao, Young Master Zhao and the rest into the horse carriages first and send them into the forests outside the city first. Do not be impolite and cause any worry to Madam."

The City guards received the order and herd the Zhao family out.

Xiang Shaolong took out the travel documents he had prepared and handed them to Zhao Ming Xiong. He sincerely advised: "Handan City will be in peril in these coming days. As long as Brother Zhao can travel day and night, he can leave Zhao and spend his remaining days in peace. Brother Zhao surely knows this better than me."

Zhao Ming Xiong is moved to tears: "I will tell you everything I know."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi smiled at each other. With the full cooperation of

Zhao Ming Xiong who is knowledgeable about Zhao Mu's rebellion plans, the Qi army and Zhao Mu will fall into their well-planned trap.

Accompanied by Xiang Shaolong and his men, Zhao Ming Xiong made his way to the North Command Centre. Gathering all his conspirators in the main hall, he proclaimed his new loyalty to Xiang Shaolong.

These men knew that their rebellion has failed. Kneeling all over the place, they beg for forgiveness.

Xiang Shaolong announced: "If you can accumulate merits to atone your sins, I will not inform the King of your betrayal. No one will know about this. However, you must follow my instructions with absolute obedience. Otherwise, you will lose your head and cause trouble to your household."

Everyone hurriedly pledged their loyalty.

Earlier as they rode to the north gate, Zhao Ming Xiong had divulged everything about the entire rebellion scheme. With the north gate under their control, victory is in their hands.

Realizing that their families are in the hands of Xiang Shaolong, and admiring their morale and thorough planning, they know that their rebellion has collapsed. Everyone did their best to cooperate and see to their duties under the command of Zhao Ming Xiong.

Xiang Shaolong got Teng Yi to assume command of the North Command Centre. Leading Ji Yanran, Shan Rou and his elite brothers, they left the north

command centre. With Zhao Ming Xiong, they rode on Handan's long and lonely street. The air is tense with the anticipation of a big skirmish.

As they turned into another long street, Jing Jun and his army of a few hundred men met up with them.

The two forces merged together in the centre of the streets.

Jing Jun joyously reported: "Gan Zhu, Li Ming and Zhao Ming have been captured by Cheng Xu's palace guards. Now, we are in control of the entire city."

This is the brilliance of Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi. If they handled everything on their own, they may arouse Xiaocheng's suspicions. But if they distribute some of the tasks to his own palace guards, Xiaocheng will have less considerations.

Zhao Ming Xiong saw that they were one step ahead in every encounter and experienced deep regrets. He agreed to help Zhao Mu as he hated Xiang Shaolong for snatching the post of the City Commander from him. In addition, he is confident of Zhao Mu's rebellion. Now, the rebellion has failed miserably.

Xiang Shaolong spoke to Zhao Ming Xiong: "I will send someone to escort you to meet up with your family outside Handan City. When the rocket signal is shot into the sky, my men will release your party instantly."

Zhao Ming Xiong shamefully sighed: "No being able to work with you is my

greatest regret.”

Xiang Shaolong intimately patted his shoulder and smiled: “Please take care Brother Zhao and have a fruitful journey.”

He continued to ride forward.

Ji Yanran rode beside him and spoke with complete elation: “General Dong is full of creative and brilliant strategies. Yanran is bowled over by your extraordinary abilities. I fully submit to and admire your ingenuity.”

On the other side, Shan Rou pouted: “This man only has some simple tricks up his sleeve; why is Yanran so fascinated?”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran exchanged a loving glance and smiled with mutual understanding.

Under the illumination of the street lamps, the long streets of this ancient city are filled with the blowing of cold winds. The singular galloping sounds of the horses added to the mysterious feel of the night.

With two great beauties at either side, Xiang Shaolong fantasized that this is indeed paradise as compared to the first time he came to Handan City. Even in his wildest dream, he would never have thought that the entire city will be at his beck and call. The future of this beautiful city is in his hands.

His thoughts drifted into the future 21st century. As he is busy day dreaming, the sound of footsteps brought him back to reality.

Zhao Ba stepped out of the shadows and greeted him.

Xiang Shaolong dismounted from his horse and greeted: “Hi Headmaster!”

Ji Yanran is afraid to be recognised and hid behind Xiang Shaolong. Zhao Ba gladly announced: “Everything is taking place as planned. The Marquis Residence is fully surrounded and not a soul is able to leave without running into our arms.”

Xiang Shaolong informed: “I shall have to trouble Headmaster with the attack on the Marquis’s residence. When the first rocket is shot from the City north command centre, Zhao Mu’s men will pour out from his residence to attack the palace with the Qi army. That will be the best time to ambush them. But no matter what happens, do not attack the Marquis residence until you have seen my personal rocket signal. I have special orders by the King to slip into the residence and capture Zhao Mu the traitor alive.”

Zhao Ba realised that he is fully in charge of the attack. It is equivalent to Xiang Shaolong giving him full credit for this effort. He was jubilant and agreed to wait for the signal.

Xiang Shaolong added: “Tonight’s password has been changed from ‘The Qin shall fall’ to ‘Long live our King’, do not show any mercy to our enemies. Wonderful! It is almost time. Let’s put on our identification bands.”

He gestured and his men brought out pieces of red cloth from their pockets. The cloth is tied around the right hand of all their followers.

Zhao Ba agreed to his suggestion and left to distribute the red cloth bands to his men.

Xiang Shaolong and his men walked over to a site where he can overlook the entire Marquis Residence. His army of three thousand elite city guards and Zhao Ba's martial warriors have fully surrounded the Marquis Residence and are in full battle mode. The point of contention will be on the main road that leads to the palace.

Everyone has a red cloth around their right arms to differentiate between friend and foe.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself: "Zhao Mu, you are trapped like a bird in a cage."

Revitalised, he called: "Little Jun!"

Jing Jun bowed and answered: "At your service, City Commander!"

Xiang Shaolong could barely hold his laughter and smiled: "Go!"

Jing Jun muttered a reply and led several of his elite brothers away.

Zhao Ba has finished instructing his men and came to find Xiang Shaolong. Ji Yanran was shocked and hid herself within the crowd of elite brothers.

Zhao Ba arrogantly boasted: "I have brought two siege vehicles with me. I guarantee that Zhao Mu's perimeter wall will fall in a few blows. By then,

death will be too easy for them.”

Xiang Shaolong is wary of his thirst for action and repeatedly reminded him to act according to their battle plan.

Zhao Ba has always admired Xiang Shaolong since the duel at his martial school. He did not mind the nagging and promised to follow his plans strictly.

After a few hours, Xiang Shaolong estimated that the appropriate time has come. Giving his last order to Zhao Ba to hold his position, he personally led his elite brothers towards the water channel where he and Shan Rou had used to slip into the Marquis Residence before.

All these while, Jing Jun and his helpers have been using sandbags to divert the water source away from Zhao Mu’s residence.

As Xiang Shaolong was visualizing about the sinking water levels within the residence, he heard a loud ‘Bang!’. From the north of the city, a single rocket is shooting up into the sky and exploded into a burst of golden yellow fireworks. The fireworks continue to float down like a shower of rain, lighting up the sky in an enchanting manner.

Ji Yanran stared until the sky returns to darkness and sighed: “The Qi’s vanguard is here.”

A unique splashing sound is heard as a half-drenched Pu Bu emerged from the water channel.

Jing Jun hurriedly pulled him out of the water.

Pu Bu reported: “Zhao Mu is tricked. He is complete unaware of what is happening outside.”

Xiang Shaolong quickly asked: “Will he personally lead the attack on the palace?”

Pu Bu despising replied: “This coward will not risk his own life. Otherwise, he need not hide in the inner chamber. There is a secret tunnel there that will bring him out of the residence.”

Shan Rou inquired: “Are there any guards on the other side of the water channel?”

Pu Bu answered: “Everyone is assembled at the parade square and are ready to assault the palace. There is not a single guard anywhere near the pond.”

Xiang Shaolong checked: “How is our brothers’ situation?”

Jing Jun came over and gave Pu Bu a fresh change of clothes. As Pu Bu got undressed at the spot, the two girls quickly turned their backs to him.

As he changed, Pu Bu smiled: “They already knew what to do. The best thing is that Zhao Mu actually grouped them together and put Liu Chao and myself in charge. Therefore, we can attack and retreat as we liked.”

Although the Marquis Residence is complete quiet, everyone knows that

Zhao Mu's family warriors have set off to attack the nearby palace. The warriors have disguised themselves as palace guards and are well-trained. If not for Xiang Shaolong's well-prepared counter attack and as well as reports from spies, they do have a high chance of success.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that the stream is fully diverted and the river bed is showing, he exclaimed: "Let's go!"

Upon hearing his order, the impatient Jing Jun dived in first while the rest of the elite brothers swam after him.

Pu Bu could tell that every man is highly-skilled and expressed his admiration.

Shan Rou gave a short battle cry and squeezed in as well.

Xiang Shaolong wrapped his hand around the thin waist of Ji Yanran and joked: "Is Talented Lady Ji willing to accompany hubby to go swimming in the drain?"

Pu Bu then realised the real identity of this soldier. He was dumbfounded and could only stare stupidly at her.

This belle gently consented: "I will gladly accompany you to the ends of hell. A little cave like this is nothing to be afraid of."

Xiang Shaolong checked his time and could foresee Zhao Mu's men walking into Zhao Ba's trap. This is the best time to sneak into the residence. He sighed with relief and sounded: "It's our turn!"

Sounds of killing reverberated from the north of Handan City. It must be Cheng Xu's palace guards and Teng Yi's city guards ambushing the Qi army who are coming out from the tunnel. If the Qi army is led by Dan Chu, Tian Dan will have to lose his favourite general tonight.

Except for capturing Zhao Mu, his elite brothers are not involved in the fighting. To capture Zhao Mu back to Xianyang and not losing a single man in the process is a feat that he himself could not have imagined at the start of the mission.

Ji Yanran shoved him lightly and he snapped out of his mental reasoning. Focusing on the situation at hand, he jumped into the stream.

When Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong were pulled out of the dried pond, all the elite brothers have readied themselves for battle and all the crossbows are loaded.

Liu Chao and their band of fifty brothers were awaiting their arrival. Everyone is exceptionally happy.

Now, Xiang Shaolong is a world-famous character. To have such a good master, they are naturally over the moon.

Shan Rou impatiently hissed: "Hurry up!"

Xiang Shaolong was about to say something when battle cries and killing sounds can be heard from the direction of the palace. Like a tidal wave, the cries come in surges.

To keep it short, Xiang Shaolong commanded: “No one is to kill any servants, women or children. Pu Bu will lead the way. Let’s move!”

Pu Bu drew his long sword and charge ahead with Xiang Shaolong right behind him.

As they turned into a long corridor after passing through the garden, they ran into several family warriors who are guarding the inner chamber entrance with ferocious dogs. The warriors are astonished to see such a large number of trespassers. Before they could move a muscle, crossbow arrows fell like rain and there were no survivors.

Xiang Shaolong’s forces grouped into an attacking formation and killed their way into the inner chamber.

Zhao Mu’s family warriors are unable to defend themselves and are mainly killed by arrows even before they could draw their weapon.

The servants have been posted to other parts of the residence on Zhao Mu’s instructions, making the assault easier than expected.

Every human they came across was killed like chopping vegetables. The speed of the operation is beyond imagination. In the blink of an eye, the two hundred family warriors guarding the inner chamber were slayed.

Anxiously waiting for news of the rebellion’s success, Zhao Mu is still unaware of the impending danger. As he saw Pu Bu leading a pack of formidable intruders and forcing their way in, he stood up in panic. Under the

stinging sound of the crossbow firing, the several family warriors in the same room collapsed to the floor. No one was spared.

Zhao Mu frantically pulled out his sword. Seeing her arch enemy, Shan Rou's eyes reddened and she shot forward. While he is still in shock, she disarmed him and kicked him, sending him sprawling across the floor.

Six elite brothers leaped over and tied him up securely.

Pah! Pah!

Shan Rou slapped him on both cheeks and pointed at him scolding: "Traitor! Can you recognize who is your Mistress? I am the daughter of Qi's Master Shan. Do you remember how you wiped out my entire household?"

Both of Zhao Mu's cheeks turned swollen and red with marks of Shan Rou's palm. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as he looked at Shan Rou in a daze.

Xiang Shaolong came to him and joyfully greeted: "How is Marquis doing?"

Zhao Mu's entire body was shaking. He furiously cursed: "Dong Kuang, you are really good!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly said: "I am not Dong Kuang!"

"Aiyah!" Zhao Mu cried. Shan Rou gave him a hard kick and he looked really down and out.

“Wang Zhuo! I knew that you are an ungrateful traitor!”

Xiang Shaolong leisurely laughed. Using his normal voice, he states: “I am not Wang Zhuo!”

Zhao Mu was taken aback as he stared closely at him. His voice shaking, he said: “You are...”

Xiang Shaolong removed his mask and handed it to his men, instructing: “Proceed as planned.”

When Zhao Mu saw his real appearance. He tragically groaned and did not know what to say.

Xiang Shaolong icily laughed: “When you raped and killed my women, did you even dream that such a day will come?”

Jing Jun went up to him and punched him hard on the stomach. Zhao Mu kneeled down in pain.

Ji Yanran shouted from afar: “We have found the tunnel entrance!”

Xiang Shaolong faced Jing Jun: “You check out the tunnel first. If it is unblocked, we will follow you. Aren’t you going to remove your mask?”

Piak!

Zhao Mu received another kicked by Shan Rou and fell down. The look on his

face is ferocious and fearful.

Jing Jun removed his mask and hand it to his men. Leading another group of elite brothers, he entered the secret tunnel.

Xiang Shaolong held onto Shan Rou to prevent her from beating Zhao Mu further.

Shan Rou mournfully wailed and fell into his arms and cried her heart out.

Xiang Shaolong could understand her state of mind and lovingly held her shoulder. At the same time, he told his men: "Fix the two masks onto two men whose build is similar to myself and Master Jun. Then set this place on fire. Be careful not to alert those men who are guarding the external halls of the residence."

His men left to carry out his orders.

Shan Rou stopped sobbing and swore: "I want to kill Zhao Mu."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Shan Rou madly laughed: "Look at the sight of you. I am only trying to scare you." She struggled and left his embrace, her face red and awkward about losing her composure.

Ji Yanran returned to his side. Together, they can hear loud sounds of frantic killing from the direction of the palace.

Liu Chao and his men are familiar with the residence. In a short time, they

have accumulated a large amount of wood and dry grass and placed them all over the place. Once a fire breaks out, no one can even think of coming in or even putting the fire out.

Jing Jun sent someone to report that the tunnel is usable.

Xiang Shaolong was elated. He got someone to stuff Zhao Mu's mouth and ship him into the tunnel.

Under his command, everyone threw their torches into the stacks of dry grass and wood. In these times, buildings are mainly constructed out of wood. When a building catches fire, even the immortals are powerless to intervene.

Before he entered the tunnel, Xiang Shaolong shot out the rocket signal.

It is time for Zhao Ba to attack the Marquis Residence.

When he reaches the inner parts of the Residence, he will discover that it has become a sea of fire. Countless corpses will be recovered and it will be a challenge to identify which body belongs to Zhao Mu.

He may find Dong Kuang's and Little Jun's bodies and mistook them to be trapped in the fire and perished with Zhao Mu.

As to why the fire is so strong, it must be Zhao Mu who had placed these dry grass and firewood in the first place. If the rebellion fails, he will burn himself to death. Unexpectedly, he ran into Dong Kuang and his men and they are all

consumed by the inferno.

Everyone in Handan will mourn him; not Xiang Shaolong but the Dong Horse Fanatic who enjoyed a short burst of fame.

If the people of Zhao ever learn that the real Dong Kuang is still in Chu, they will find it hard to believe.

With regards to Teng Yi, he will fake his death on the battlefield. Unless someone is disrespectful and tear at the face of his scapegoat, the truth will be hidden forever. The tunnel exit is at the back garden of an unoccupied villa nearby. Everyone joyfully followed the travelling directions and avoided the palace battleground and the area north of the city. Undetected, they arrived at the North gate.

Leading scores of their elite brothers, Teng Yi met them at the City gate. Catching sight of a bounded Zhao Mu, he laughed: "Marquis is indeed thoughtful to join us."

Leading everyone, he got on his horse and rode out of Handan City. He even commanded the leader of the City Guard as he left: "Keep a close watch on the City gates. I am bringing some men to search for more enemies."

A huge force of riders galloped mightily onto the wide grasslands. The sky is filled with stars and could only increase their high spirits. Only but shouting out loud can they express their extreme delight.

After riding through the grasslands, everyone looked to the west where Qin

is.

Travelling for another five or six miles, Xiang Shaolong rode his horse up a little hill and looked back towards Handan City.

Many parts of the city are in fire, lighting up the sky.
Hoof beats can be heard as Wu Zhuo and Wu Guo caught up to them with the rest of the elite brothers.

They cheered upon witnessing Zhao Mu who is trussed up like a chicken on one of the horses.

Xiang Shaolong looked to his men smiling and roared: "Is everyone here?!"
Everyone reported that they are safe and well.

Xiang Shaolong gave a big laugh: "Then let's go home!"

He raised his horse whip and gently smacked his horse.
The war horse reacted to the smack and galloped downhill.
Everyone cheered and rode after him.

Everyone speedily rode across the beautiful plains under the glittering stars.

End of Book 10